THE GIRLS OF FRIENDLY TERRACE

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Peggy

THE GIRLS OF FRIENDLY TERRACE
Or: Peggy Raymond's Success

BY

HARRIET LUMMIS SMITH

ILLUSTRATED BY

JOHN GOSS

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"A sheeted figure at the door welcomed each comer with extended hand"

"The rapidity with which the ice cream disappeared was startling, to say the least"

"Staring with surprise at her brother's crestfallen figure"

"'Why not ask Peggy?'"

"Luncheon was served shortly after their arrival"

The Girls of Friendly Terrace

CHAPTER I

THE RETURN OF PEGGY

The naming of the Terrace was a happy accident. It must have been an accident, for Jenkins Avenue crossed it at right angles, and just to the north ran Sixtieth Street. No one could have guessed when the Terrace was laid out that the name would prove so appropriate, and that the comfortable cottages would have such a cordial, neighborly look, as if nodding greetings to one another across their neat strips of lawn. When the name Friendly Terrace appeared on the street lamps at the corner there were no smiling faces visible at the front windows of the houses, no plump babies rolling over the lawns, no girls gathering on one another's porches, like robins in the boughs of a cherry tree, or strolling along the sidewalk, two by two, with their arms about each other's waists. The naming of the Terrace must have been a happy accident, or else an inspiration.

There was usually a girl in evidence on Friendly Terrace at any hour of the day, and this morning there were three of them. They ranged from tall Priscilla,

who was five feet seven, and mortally afraid of growing taller, down to Amy, who was almost as broad as she was long, and who was in a chronic state of announcing her determination to leave off eating candy next week. Ruth, who on this occasion served as the connecting link between the two extremes, was a slender girl, whose alert air told plainly that she was on the watch for something or somebody.

"Once when my Aunt Fanny was coming to make us a visit," Amy observed reminiscently, "her train was six hours late. Just think if Peggy's train--"

"Don't!" exclaimed Priscilla rather fretfully, and Ruth said with decision, "O Peggy's train couldn't be late, she's coming such a tiny bit of a way."

"It might be if there was a wreck," Amy insisted triumphantly. "That was the matter when Aunt Fanny came. A freight train was wrecked just ahead of them, and they had to stand on the track for hours and hours. We waited luncheon for her till I was almost starved."

The other girls exchanged amused smiles. The thought of Amy, undergoing the pangs of starvation, was likely to present itself in a humorous light. Amy saw the look and understood it, but was far from being offended. In point of disposition, Amy was as sweet as the confections she was always on the point of denying herself. An appreciative giggle showed that she understood her friends' point of view.

"That's always the way," she said, with unimpaired cheerfulness. "Fat people never get any sympathy." She stopped abruptly, for Ruth had uttered a stifled scream and was pinching her arm.

"The hack!" cried Ruth. "The hack's coming. Peggy's here."

The non-committal vehicle, rapidly approaching from the direction of the Avenue, was mud-stained and shabby, but the appearance of Cinderella's golden coach would hardly have been the occasion for greater excitement. Ruth clasped her hands, her color coming and going. Tall Priscilla forgot her dignity and capered like a five year old, while Amy went tripping down the street to meet the hack, which, of course, passed her, reducing her to the necessity of following in pursuit, panting and very red in the face. All along the Terrace people came to the windows at the sound of wheels, for from the mothers down to the babies, everyone knew that Peggy Raymond was coming home that morning. Even Taffy, Peggy's dog, bounded out to add his mite to the general welcome.

"Talk of the intelligence of animals," gasped Priscilla, as Taffy shot between Ruth and herself, narrowly avoiding upsetting both. "That dog knows it's Peggy just as well as we do. O why don't the man stop in the right place?"

The mud-splashed vehicle came to a standstill midway between Peggy's home and the vacant cottage next door. Before it had fairly halted the girls were abreast of it.

"Here we are, honey!"

"Hurry up! We're dying for a sight of you."

"O, don't be such a slow-poke. Even Taffy is losing patience." This last comment was unnecessary, as Taffy was speaking for himself, barking uproariously, and leaping about with an air of the keenest anticipation.

The door of the hack opened, and very deliberately a girl stepped out. She was a tall girl, dressed in black, which added to her apparent slenderness. Her lips, which suggested a degree of self-repression, unusual in a girl of her age, were tightly set. She did not look in the direction of the crestfallen trio ranged along the sidewalk.

"Why!" cried Amy, who had an odd fashion of announcing discoveries which had been apparent to everyone for some time, "It isn't Peggy after all."

"We--you--I mean we thought you were somebody else," explained Priscilla, with considerably less than her usual self-confidence.

The newcomer took as little notice of the stammered apology as she had of her boisterous welcome. Silently she assisted a lady draped in mourning to alight, and together they made their way to the empty cottage, which displayed in the front window the sign, "To Rent." The hack driver grinned, fully appreciating the little comedy, while the girls exchanged glances of mingled wrath and humiliation.

Amy was the first to see the humorous side. She shut her eyes and staggered to the fence for support. Her peals of laughter must have been plainly audible to the girl who was trying the key in the front door of the vacant cottage, but the latter only tightened her lips and did not turn her head. Ruth and Priscilla, after staring blankly at Amy for a moment, joined in her laughter, though in a rather half-hearted fashion.

"She looked so out of temper," gasped Amy breathlessly. "And we'd been calling her 'honey' and telling her we were dying to see her. O dear!" She wiped her eyes, and started on another burst of merriment which almost immediately died away in a gurgle of astonishment.

"Peggy!" Three voices pronounced the name at once, with varied intonations of surprise and pleasure. So engrossed had they been that they had not noticed the arrival of a second hack, which with magical suddenness had spilled out upon the sidewalk a large girl and a small one, to say nothing of a motley collection of suit-cases, hand-bags, bundles and umbrellas. Settling with the hackman delayed Peggy a half-minute, and the girls arrived at the gate as soon as she, but she waved them aside.

"First kiss for mother," Peggy cried, and shot straight as an arrow into the arms of the lady who stood waiting on the steps. There was a long clasp and more kisses than one, and none of Peggy's friends thought the less of her for that loyal rush for the one who loved her best.

It was no wonder that Peggy Raymond's return was an event on Friendly Terrace. She was the sort of girl you could not see without wishing you knew her, and could not know without beginning to love her. From her reddish-brown top-knot down to the tips of her toes she was bubbling over with life and joyous energy. It was a nice world, Peggy thought, full of nice people. Every to-morrow was stored for her with wonderful possibilities, as the yesterdays were full of sweet recollections. Complaining, discontented people wakened in her the same sorrowful wonder she felt when she saw a blind man feeling his uncertain way along the street. Indeed, to Peggy discontent seemed another and more dreadful form of blindness.

"Come into the house, all of you." Peggy was making up for the brief delay by kissing everybody twice around. "Hasn't Dorothy grown, girls? Wouldn't you think she was more than four years old? What are you doing, Dorothy darling?"

"I'm wipin' off kisses," Dorothy replied with great distinctness, scrubbing violently at her rosebud of a mouth. "'Cause I don't like kisses to stick on, 'cept my mamma's."

"She says that because she's forgotten you since last year," Peggy explained excusingly.

"She'll be real friendly after a day or two. O Amy, dear, you mustn't try to lift that heavy suit-case. It weighs as much as you do."

"I'm afraid not. I've gained three pounds since you went away," Amy replied dolefully. "Next week I'm going to stop eating candy, and begin to walk ten miles a day."

Everybody laughed, for, when hearts are light, old jokes serve as well as new ones. They streamed into the house, a laden procession, and piled Peggy's belongings in the middle of the living-room. Then they pulled her down on the window-seat, chafing under the undeniable difficulty of evenly dividing one girl among three.

"I'm so glad to see you, I could just eat you up," Amy declared, seating herself on Peggy's knee, as each of the others had preempted a side. "And to think of your staying six weeks, when you said you'd only be gone a month."

"I hated to leave Alice," Peggy's face clouded for a moment, as she spoke her sister's name. "She isn't a bit well. You know we are going to keep Dorothy with us for a while. She's so full of life that she's a tax on her mother."

"I stood on a tacks once," observed Dorothy, suddenly becoming interested. "It sticked into me, and I hollered." She frowned meditatively as she added, "I don't like you to call me a tacks, either."

"It's another kind, darling. O girls, you don't know how good it seems to get back to the Terrace, where people know each other and are real neighbors. I don't see how Alice stands it."

"Is it so bad living in a very big city?" Priscilla asked, rather doubtfully. "I believe I'd love it. I like crowds and noise and something happening every moment."

Peggy shook her head with decision. "Just wait till I tell you. Alice lives in a flat, and there's only one woman in the building whom she'd know if she met her on the street. One morning while I was there we heard the greatest commotion in the flat just over ours. Somebody screamed, and then we could hear somebody else hurrying around right over our heads, and then there was the sound of dreadful crying. The windows were open, you know, and we heard everything as plainly as you hear me."

"Well, what had happened?" Amy demanded, as Peggy paused dramatically.

"That's what we couldn't imagine. I wanted to rush right up first thing, but Alice said people didn't do that way in big cities, and that she didn't know the woman at all, though she thought the name on the letter box was Flemming. Well, the crying kept up till I couldn't stand it any longer. I just walked upstairs and knocked, and when the girl came to the door, I said I lived on the next floor and I was afraid that somebody was in trouble and could I do anything to help.

"O girls!" Peggy's voice grew pensive at the remembrance of that sorrowful scene. "I never imagined anything so dreadful. The poor woman--her name was Fletcher instead of Flemming--had just had word that her little boy had been hurt by an automobile, and taken to a hospital. And she was so upset that she didn't know how to get ready to go to him, and the girl was so stupid that she didn't know how to help her. And I rushed around and found her hat and coat and put on her shoes for her--she was wearing slippers--and did everything, just as if I'd known her all my life. And then she wouldn't let me go, and I went along with her to the hospital. She told me afterward that she had only lived in the city a few years and hadn't made many friends. A few years!" repeated Peggy with fine scorn.

"Why, if anybody on this Terrace was in trouble, even if she hadn't lived here more than six weeks, we'd all be flocking in to see what we could do for her."

"Did the boy die?" asked Amy, missing the moral Peggy was trying to point, in her interest in the story.

"No, indeed. He wasn't hurt as badly as they thought at first. He was home again before I left, such a nice boy, not far from Dick's age. O here's Dick now."

Peggy's younger brother, Dick Raymond, coming in at that moment, said, "Hello, Peggy," in the most matter-of-fact manner imaginable and submitted with apparent resignation to his sister's kiss. But no one was deceived. Dick's admiration of Peggy was an open secret in Friendly Terrace. The boy was hot and perspiring. He had run all the way home from his music teacher's, so impatient was he for a glimpse of the dearest as well as the most remarkable girl in the world,

as he firmly believed, and yet at the sight of her, he had only a "hello Peggy," and a shame-faced kiss. Luckily Peggy was not the sort of girl who needed to be told certain things. She understood without any explanation.

"Guess we're going to have some new neighbors," Dick observed, looking out of the window, apparently glad of an opportunity to change the topic of the conversation.

"Who? Where? The next house?" Peggy stood looking over her brother's shoulder, as two people came from the vacant cottage and moved toward the waiting hack. Her eyes dwelt approvingly on the slender figure of a black-gowned girl, carefully assisting the older lady into the carriage.

"Girls!" Peggy's voice fairly tinkled, as she made the pleasant announcement. "It looks as if we might be going to have another girl on the Terrace. Won't that be fine?"

The others exchanged dubious glances. "Always room for one more, I suppose," Priscilla said at last.

"And she looks like such a sweet girl, too," Peggy continued, as the shabby hack rumbled off. "She had such a nice way of helping her mother--that is, I suppose it's her mother."

Amy coughed in an embarrassed fashion, and Ruth said hastily, "We took her for you at first, Peggy. We were watching for your hack, you know, and hers came first."

"I imagine she must have thought us very cordial to strangers," Priscilla added, choking down a laugh, as she remembered the contemptuous indifference of the girl who had received a welcome intended for somebody else.

"I'm glad of that," said the innocent Peggy. "Because that may help them in making up their minds to come here. And I don't like to have a vacant house on the Terrace. It reminds me of a child shedding its first teeth. The more smiling and pleasant it looks, the more you notice that something is missing."

From across the street somebody whistled, a rather peculiar whistle, long and piercing. Ruth jumped to her feet.

"It's Graham," she said. "What is he doing home at this time in the morning? O, I wonder if luncheon really can be ready?"

"Of course it can," Amy cried tragically. "I'm nearly starved. I couldn't eat any breakfast this morning, I was so excited because Peggy was coming."

"You'll be over this afternoon, won't you, Peggy?" Priscilla asked as she rose to go, and her face fell slightly as Peggy answered, "Why, of course. I'll run in to see all of you." It was just a little hard for Priscilla to remember that her claim on Peggy was in no sense superior to that of the other girls. She was one of the people who liked to be first, and, though generous enough with her other possessions, she found it hard to share her friend. Yet there were moments when Priscilla

acknowledged to herself that a fraction of Peggy's affection was worth more than the undivided devotion other girls had given her in the fervid friendships which, in a few weeks or months at the outside, had burned themselves out.

Peggy was as good as her word. But when she crossed the street that afternoon, on her way to Priscilla's, she noticed that the sign "To Rent" had disappeared from the window of the house next door. "That means new neighbors, certain sure," thought Peggy hopefully. Nor did she guess what a new element her prospective neighbors were to introduce into the cheerful atmosphere of Friendly Terrace.

CHAPTER II

THE GIRL NEXT DOOR

A delicious odor was gradually pervading the Raymond cottage, a spicy fragrance which of itself was suggestive of Peggy's return. For Peggy's accomplishments were of a practical sort. The crayon which adorned the wall of her mother's bedroom, and which represented Peggy's supreme achievement in the field of art, had been the subject of considerable discussion in the family. Dick insisted that a prominent object in the foreground was a Newfoundland dog, while his mother accepted Peggy's assurance that it was a sheep grazing, and refused to listen to the arguments by which Dick supported his position. As a musician, too, Peggy had her obvious limitations, but when it came to transforming the cold potatoes, and the unpromising ends of the roast left from dinner, into an appetizing luncheon, it would be hard to find Peggy's equal; while the fame of her sponge cake and her gingerbread had spread far beyond the confines of the Terrace. And since this is a practical world, with very commonplace needs, there is much to be said in favor of such accomplishments as Peggy cultivated.

She moved about the spotless kitchen with a quick, light step, humming under her breath something which, if not exactly a tune, was, nevertheless, like the chirp of a cricket, or the purring of a tea-kettle, very pleasant to hear. In her blue gingham apron, with her sleeves rolled to the elbow, she looked decidedly businesslike, though the costume was far from being unbecoming. Indeed Dick, sitting on the window-sill, gravely observant of Peggy's occupation, noticed how the heat from the range had deepened the pink on his sister's cheeks, and told himself that Peggy was growing pretty. Not for worlds would he have said as much

to Peggy herself, but, for all that, the discovery gave him the greatest satisfaction.

"Put on plenty of sugar and cinnamon now," Dick advised from his precarious perch on the window-sill. "You'd ought to have tasted the cinnamon rolls Sally made while you were gone. She scrimped on the sugar and the cinnamon, you see, and you wouldn't have known what you were eating. What's the good of making cinnamon rolls at all, if you're going to scrimp?"

"That's right, Dick," Peggy agreed. "If you're going to do anything, put enough into it so that it will amount to something when it's done." Peggy was not given to lecturing her younger brother after the fashion of some girls, but she had a habit of hanging little sentence sermons on pegs which chanced to be available--cinnamon rolls, in this instance. And Dick, who would have turned sulky in a moment if he had suspected Peggy of "preaching," looked thoughtful, and stowed the suggestion away for further reference.

Peggy went on rolling, cutting, sifting on cinnamon with lavish hand and adding little dabs of butter until the second pan of rolls was ready for the oven. Then Dorothy, standing by the open door, made a startling announcement. "House is a-fire! House is a-fire!"

"O Dorothy!" Peggy flew to the door, and turned in the direction in which the chubby finger was pointing. As she looked, the kitchen window in the next house was lowered and a cloud of black smoke escaped, accompanied by an odor which caused Dorothy to wrinkle her nose and say disgustedly, "Glad I don't live in that house."

"They let something on the stove burn; beans, I guess," said Peggy, sniffing wisely. "It's dreadful trying to cook while you are getting settled after moving." She looked thoughtfully toward the house next door, which presented the forlorn appearance to be expected considering that the tenants had moved in only the day before. Through the uncurtained windows Peggy caught glimpses of incongruous groups of furniture, of step-ladders standing aimlessly in the midst of the confusion, of pictures leaning precariously against the wall. To Peggy the sight was like an audible appeal for help.

"I might take them some of my cinnamon rolls," she exclaimed, turning to Dick.

"Take who?" As long as Dick made his meaning clear, he was never troubled as to grammatical correctness.

"Why, the next door people. It would make them feel as though they really had neighbors and, of course, I can't go over to see the girl till the house is settled."

"If you'd been going to do that," Dick said rather reprovingly, "you ought to have baked more than two pans. But then," he added with an evident effort to be generous, "I guess they need them more than we do. Go ahead."

The rolls came out of the oven just the golden-brown that Peggy wanted.

Peggy might draw a sheep that looked like an own cousin to a Newfoundland dog, but she had the joy of a real artist in her cookery. With shining eyes she gazed upon the work of her hand. "They're perfect," she announced, with an unsuccessful effort at a judicial air.

"They do look good enough to eat," Dick agreed. "Say, give me one. I'm hungry."

"And I'm hungry, too," cried Dorothy, edging close.

"When the next pan comes out," Peggy promised. "I'll run over with these so our neighbors will know what they've got to depend on for luncheon." She set her rolls on a plate, threw a napkin over them, and without stopping to remove her apron, crossed the yard to the next house. The kitchen window was still open, and as Peggy stood upon the steps she heard the sharp tinkle of broken glass.

"There's something gone to smash. Dear me, what a time they're having," thought Peggy, wishing her acquaintance with the new arrivals was sufficiently advanced so that she could offer to lend her aid, for her capable fingers fairly itched to assist in bringing order out of the chaos within. She knocked, and, after waiting for some minutes, knocked again, this time a little louder.

"Elaine!" a voice cried. "Elaine! Somebody's at the back door."

"O dear!" someone else said distinctly, and Peggy's color heightened, even though she felt confident that the speaker's mood would change as soon as she knew her caller's errand. "So her name is Elaine," Peggy thought, as footsteps slow, and seemingly reluctant, sounded on the bare floors. "Such a pretty name."

The door opened violently and a girl looked out. It was the same black-gowned girl Peggy had watched from her window a few days earlier, but, on this occasion, her appearance was decidedly less prepossessing. Apparently she had neglected to comb her hair that morning, or else her forenoon's occupation had been strenuous enough to obliterate all traces of that ceremony. Her apron was soiled. She wore an expression of weary discouragement, which seemed as incongruous with her girlish face as white hair would have done. The eyes she turned upon Peggy were anything but friendly, and yet at the sight of her, Peggy's heart swelled with a sympathy that was almost tender.

"Good morning!" Peggy extended her offering with a cordial smile. "I know how busy you must be getting settled, and I brought you over a plate of rolls. I live--"

"We don't care to buy anything this morning," said the girl, and made a movement as if to close the door. Peggy's face flamed to the roots of her hair.

"O, you don't understand," she cried. "I'm a neighbor of yours. I've brought you over a plate of cinnamon rolls, I've just finished baking. They're not for sale."

Elaine was a rather pale girl. But as Peggy finished her little speech, two spots of red showed in the other's thin cheeks.

"We're not objects of charity, thank you," she said. The door shut with a slam. Peggy, her rejected offering in her hand, stood bewildered on the step. For a moment she battled with the temptation to push open the door and force the girl inside to listen to reason. With a choked laugh, that covered not a little humiliation, she realized the folly of such a proceeding and turned away.

Peggy's eyes were absent as she entered the house. She took the second pan of rolls from the oven without feeling any disposition to gloat over their yellow-brown perfection. Then, remembering her promise to Dick and Dorothy, she put some of the rolls on a plate and carried them into the next room. Her thoughts were still full of the rebuff she had received from her new neighbor, and when she had set the plate of rolls on the table she stood with clasped hands, looking hard at nothing in particular, and frowning over her reflections.

"How glad she is to see us!"

"Yes, just notice her smile."

"Probably those are city manners, girls. We'll have to get used to it."

A volley of mocking laughter followed these observations, and Peggy started guiltily.

"I didn't see you," she apologized, as three girls popped up from the window-seat and approached her.

"Don't try to get out of it, Peggy," teased Priscilla, slipping her arm about Peggy's waist. "You know you can't be glad to see us with such a face."

"O, Peggy! What delicious rolls!" Amy hung over the plate with an ecstatic gasp. "Don't they look as if they'd melt in your mouth."

"Help yourself," Peggy cried. "All of you."

"They'll make you fat, Amy," warned Ruth, extending a slim hand. "Priscilla and I can eat all we want, but you'll have to refuse. You know you're going to leave off eating candy."

"Well, they're not candy, and, besides, I'd rather gain a few ounces than turn down such darlings," Amy replied recklessly. Suiting the action to the word she set her teeth in the golden-brown crust. "They're as good as they look," she announced indistinctly. "Say, Peggy, are these the kind you took over to the house next door? Dick said that was what you went out for."

Peggy nodded, her face betraying the peculiarly guilty expression that sensitive people wear when fearing that they will be forced to betray the wrongdoing of someone else. Priscilla eyed her suspiciously.

"Well, I don't see that there could have been a nicer introduction," Amy remarked with her mouth full. "How lovely it would be if all callers brought cinnamon rolls instead of visiting cards."

"What happened, Peggy?" demanded Priscilla, reading her friend's tell-tale face as if it had been an open book. "Weren't they nice to you?"

"Nice!" cried Ruth, flaring up at the mere suggestion of ill-treating Peggy. "Why shouldn't they be nice?"

"Peggy's blushing," exclaimed Amy, announcing a discovery sufficiently obvious to the least discerning. "She's blushing as red as fire. Peggy Raymond, what has happened?"

"It really wasn't anything," said poor Peggy, fairly cornered. "Only--"

"Well?"

"Only she didn't quite understand."

"Who didn't? That snippy, disagreeable girl, who puts on such ridiculous airs of being better than other people?"

Peggy's eyes widened over the vivid description whose appropriateness she was forced to admit. "I saw the girl," she replied hastily. "Her name's Elaine, I think."

"We don't care about her name, Peggy. What did she do?"

"At first she thought I'd come to sell the rolls, and she said they didn't care to buy anything."

"Peggy a pedler! I never heard anything so funny!" Amy sat down on the floor to laugh, but her amusement did not communicate itself to the others. Ruth's face still wore a protesting frown, and Priscilla's eyes were flashing.

"A pedler!" Priscilla repeated disdainfully. "She must be very observing. Well, Peggy. After you explained--"

"That seemed to make it all the worse," admitted Peggy, finding a little relief, it must be acknowledged, in the sympathy called out by her confession. "She can't have been used to neighbors, that's sure. She said they weren't objects of charity, and shut the door in my face."

An indignant explosion followed, when everybody talked at once. Then Dorothy bobbing up as expectedly as a Jack in a box, poured oil on the troubled waters by offering a suggestion. "Maybe they fought the currants was flies. I did till I bited 'em."

"O, Dorothy, what a killing child you are!" cried Amy, giving way to helpless laughter, and this time she had plenty of company. Peggy was the only one of the quartet who made any effort to conceal her merriment, Peggy having a singular theory that children should be treated just as courteously as older people. She looked regretfully at the small, erect figure marching out of the room with an air of stately displeasure. "O dear!" she sighed. "I'm afraid we've hurt her feelings. Dorothy does hate to be laughed at."

"Then she'd better give up making such speeches," remarked Amy, wiping her eyes. "But to go back to Peggy's new friend--Elaine--"

"Yes, just to think of her slamming the door in Peggy's face," cried Ruth, whose customary gentleness had quite disappeared in resentment over Peggy's

snubbing. "If she doesn't want neighbors she needn't have any. I move that we let her alone, just as much as if she lived down town somewhere."

"We didn't tell you, Peggy," Priscilla exclaimed, taking up the tale. "But we found out the sort of girl she was the day you came. We thought it was your hack, you know, and we rushed to grab you the minute you stepped out, and we were all screaming for you to hurry, and when this girl got out we felt cheap enough to go right through the sidewalk."

"Yes, we did," interrupted Amy. "If there had been an open coal-hole handy it would have taken me about five seconds to disappear."

"The way she took it showed the sort of girl she is," insisted Priscilla. "Instead of smiling, or saying that it didn't matter, she acted as if we'd been so many hitching-posts standing in a row. Didn't see us or hear us, either. I knew in a minute that I'd never have any use for her if she lived here a thousand years."

"That's just the way I feel," said Ruth.

"Me, too," exclaimed Amy from the rug, and absent-mindedly she reached for another cinnamon roll.

It was Peggy's turn. "O, girls," she pleaded, in tones of distress. "Let's not be in such a hurry to make up our minds. You see, we've hardly seen anything of her."

"Quite enough," observed Priscilla.

"And things were rather against her both times," continued Peggy, disregarding the interruption. "When we come to know her we may like her awfully well."

A depressing silence implied that no one but Peggy herself thought such a result at all probable.

"And, anyway," concluded Peggy, falling back on the supreme argument, "she hasn't tried living in Friendly Terrace yet. We don't know what that will do for her. Instead of letting her alone, I think we'd better show her what it means to have neighbors of the neighborly kind."

It did not appear that a continuation of the discussion was likely to bring them into agreement. Amy tried changing the subject. "Do you know what this roll reminds me of?" she asked, looking thoughtfully at the fragments in her hand.

No one could imagine.

"The first time I ever tasted one of Peggy's rolls," Amy explained, "it was on a picnic at the Park. It was the time that Ruth fell into the lake, feeding the swans."

"I'd forgotten the rolls, but I remember that picnic," Ruth said. "The picnics this year didn't seem like the real thing," she added disconsolately, "with Peggy gone."

"'Tisn't too late for another," Priscilla cried. "Why not go to-morrow?"

If the quartet had failed to agree on the subject of Peggy's next-door neigh-

bor there was no lack of unanimity as far as the picnic was concerned. In five minutes it was arranged that Ruth was to bring the sandwiches and Amy the fudge, while Peggy had agreed to get up early and make some little sponge cakes.

"You won't mind if I bring Dorothy, will you, girls?" Peggy inquired anxiously. "You see, she really does make a lot of extra work, she's such a mischief, and I don't want to leave too much for mother to do."

It was the general opinion that Dorothy's presence would add to the gaiety of the picnic, and, after completing their plans, the friends parted with looks expressive of cheerful anticipation. But Peggy's bright face clouded over as she glanced a little later toward the next house, and saw, perched upon the top of a step-ladder, a slender, girlish figure, with an indefinable air of dejection and helplessness.

"O dear! I shall be glad when she's lived in the Terrace long enough to be one of us," Peggy thought. "All the trouble is that we don't understand one another. As soon as we're acquainted everything will be all right, and nobody'll have to be left out."

CHAPTER III

MAKING FRIENDS

It was just as well, as things turned out, that Peggy had resolved on an early start the following morning. Dimly through the grey dawn she became aware of an elfish, white-gowned figure perched on the foot of the bed. Her sleepy questionings as to its identity were dispelled by a sweet, high-pitched voice.

"Now this is down to the sea shore, Aunt Peggy, and that's the water where you are. Bime-by I'm going to dive and make a big splash."

Before Peggy could protest, Dorothy had carried out her intention, descending on her shrinking relative like an avalanche. "Kick, Aunt Peggy! Kick hard!" she shouted, disappointed at Peggy's failure to enter into the sport, with the spirit due its dramatic possibilities. "That's what makes the waves."

But Peggy was beyond kicking. When she had succeeded in dislodging Dorothy from a commanding position on her chest, she indulged herself in several deep breaths before saying plaintively, "O, Dorothy, why did you wake so early? It isn't time to get up yet."

"It's time to get up for a picnic day," insisted Dorothy. "And you've got to

cook luncheon, Aunt Peggy, and can I wear my rubber boots and take my dolly and my blue celluloid comb?"

Further sleep was out of the question. Making a virtue of necessity, Peggy jumped out of bed, reflecting that this early start would give the frosting on her cakes a chance to harden. Getting Dorothy dressed was a process requiring time and patience, for the child was so excited by the festivities in prospect that she could hardly stand still long enough to allow a button to be popped into its rightful button-hole. Inventors interested in perpetual motion should have made a study of Dorothy. She interrupted the process of getting her fat little legs into their black stockings by so many fantastic capers that Peggy forgot the loss of her morning nap in helpless laughter, and the day began cheerfully after all.

By breakfast time the comfortable odor of sponge cake diffused through the house, told that Peggy had made good use of her time. It penetrated Dick's bedroom, and that young man, under the mistaken impression that he was sniffing the fragrance of waffles, rose in haste and reached the breakfast table on time, an unusual feat for Dick, who dearly loved the last minutes in bed, and, as a rule, needed to be called three times before responding.

Dorothy was too excited to eat. She had made a collection of cherished belongings to take with her to the Park, and tact, as well as logic, was needed to convince her that the occasion did not call for a pink parasol or a tooth brush. A compromise was finally reached by virtue of which Dorothy agreed to leave all her belongings at home, with the exception of her "shut-eye doll," on the understanding that she was to be allowed to help in packing the lunch basket. This ordinarily prosaic task proved quite exciting that morning, owing to Dorothy's propensity to smuggle in such articles from the sideboard as appealed to her as attractive and desirable.

A little after nine the girls began to arrive. Priscilla and Ruth came up the walk at almost the same minute, and they all settled themselves to wait for Amy. It was understood that they must always wait for Amy, though, singularly enough, Amy always had a brand-new reason for her invariable delays. Either her shoestring broke at the last minute or someone called her up on the telephone, or her hat pins had disappeared, or some other unforeseen event interfered with her innate propensity to promptness. Amy's friends listened with cheerful disrespect to her latest excuses, and Amy was the only one of them all who accepted them at their face value, and honestly believed herself the soul of punctuality.

At quarter of ten Amy appeared, puffing a little, to show how she had hurried, and explaining that the fudge had refused to harden. The other baskets were grouped upon the porch and the girls sat in a row on the steps, discussing some of the interesting events which had taken place along the Terrace during Peggy's absence. At Amy's approach Peggy jumped briskly to her feet.

"We're all ready now," she said. "Where's Dorothy disappeared to? O, Dorothy! We're going to start now."

There was no answer. "Dorothy!" Peggy called again, "Come quick. The picnic's going to begin."

This assurance was effective. At the end of the hall appeared a mysterious figure which moved toward the door with hesitating and uncertain steps. A weird, white drapery concealed its face, and fell in flowing folds to its shoulders. Amy was the first to perceive its appearance and she let fall her basket and squealed.

"What is it?" she cried wildly, as Peggy, at the other end of the porch, turned upon her a startled countenance, "O, what is it?"

"What's what?" Peggy flew to answer her own question. At the sight which had alarmed Amy she stood as if petrified, her lips apart, and broken fragments of sentences escaping at intervals.

Meanwhile the slow-moving figure had reached the door. From beneath the mysterious drapery came the sound of a stifled wail. Peggy came to herself with a start.

"Dorothy!" she cried. "What have you got over yourself?" She touched the drapery with shrinking fingers. It was sticky, clinging. The fragment she touched fell off at her feet.

"I smell--yeast," exclaimed Peggy sniffing. "Yeast!" She looked about her wildly. "Girls, it's bread-sponge."

"She'll smother," exclaimed the practical Priscilla, and forthwith clawed an opening in the sticky mass, through which Dorothy's face looked out. It was a solemn face at that moment. A suspicious trembling of the lips told that the tears were not far away.

"I--I don't like Sally," faltered Dorothy. "She put somefing in a pan, up high. And when I pulled, it covered me all up."

"That's the end of the picnic, girls." Peggy spoke with forced calm. "The end, as far as I'm concerned. Bread-sponge all the way from here to the kitchen. Bread-sponge in her hair and her eyebrows."

"*I* don't care, Aunt Peggy," cried poor little Dorothy. "I'd just as soon go to the picnic all sticky."

It was a melancholy ending for so many cheerful plans. The girls protested that the picnic without Peggy would only be an aggravation. They suggested putting it off till another day. But Peggy, usually distinguished for her sweet reasonableness, was not in a mood to make the best of things.

"She'd only get into something else, girls," she insisted. "The glue pot or the molasses jug. Even if the fudge would be just as good to-morrow, you can't say as much for the sandwiches. Go along and enjoy yourselves."

While three girls wended their disconsolate way toward the Park car, a still

more dejected procession of two climbed the stairs to the Raymond bathroom. Mrs. Raymond, hearing the sound of Dorothy's stifled crying, came out to inquire the cause of the trouble, and uttered a horrified exclamation at the sight of her small granddaughter. Although divested of the greater part of the mass of bread-sponge, enough adhered to Dorothy's plump person, to give her a most unique appearance. Mrs. Raymond patted the round, tear-stained cheek, and cast a comprehending glance at Peggy's overcast face.

"I wish you had gone with the girls, dear," she said. "I could have attended to this little mischief, and it's hardly fair that you should lose your fun."

"Just as fair as that you should spend your morning scrubbing Dorothy," Peggy returned. "You ought to know I wouldn't leave it for you." Then with the honesty which was one of Peggy Raymond's charms, she added, "I suppose I might better have gone than stay at home and act like a martyr. Never mind, mother. There'll be more picnics some day."

The process of repairing damages was a slow and tedious one. At intervals Dorothy wept copiously into the bath tub, and uttered broken promises to the effect that next time she would stand in a corner and not move till the hour of starting arrived, "And I sha'n't like Sally never any more," sobbed Dorothy, who had a habit, not unknown among older girls, of holding other people responsible for her escapades, "'cause she put that up high where it could fall all over me."

The last traces of glutinous matter were at last removed from Peggy's charge. Arrayed in a clean gingham, with a bath towel over her shoulders, Dorothy was set out on the porch, where the sun could dry her golden hair. Peggy gave her attention to repairing damages elsewhere, and when she returned after twenty minutes' absence, Dorothy's hair was curling all over her head, in a flossy yellow snarl, while in her hand she held a typewritten sheet of paper.

"What's that, Dorothy?" Peggy asked, feeling the curly head for signs of dampness.

Dorothy reflected. "It's a letter, I fink," she replied, obviously giving the explanation which seemed most plausible, but speaking doubtfully.

"Let me see!" Peggy took the sheet in her hand, and began its perusal, her eyes opening wide and wider as she read.

"'honor is at stake,' replied the earl, his hand seeking his sword. The Lady Vivian uttered a cry of anguish, and sank fainting into the arms of her attendant."

"Why, how funny," Peggy broke off in the midst of the thrilling narrative to ask a practical question. "Where did this come from?"

"I guess a angel brought it," replied Dorothy, after due reflection.

"O, you goosie!" Peggy's laughter rang out blithely, and Mrs. Raymond upstairs, overheard and drew a relieved sigh. For to have Peggy low-spirited produced much the same effect as when the sun goes under a cloud.

"Where did you find the paper, dearie?" coaxed Peggy. "The wind blew it from somewhere, didn't it?"

Dorothy shook her head with vehemence, causing extreme agitation among her frizzled locks. "No, it didn't blow from anywhere. It just camed." It was evident that little information could be extracted from this source and Peggy fell back upon her own wits.

"It's typewritten. There isn't anybody around here who has a typewriter, except Harry Rind, and he wouldn't be writing about earls and swords and things. I wonder--"

Peggy broke off, and stared at the next house. The windows upstairs were open. It would be an easy matter for a sheet of paper, more enterprising than its associates, to take a little excursion into the outer world. At the same time, Peggy disliked the idea of facing Elaine again, to inquire if the typewritten sheet was her property. If it happened to belong to someone else, the chances were that Elaine would be as uncompromisingly disagreeable as she had been the day before. And to be snubbed twice in two days was too much, even for Peggy.

"I don't believe it's worth anything anyway," thought Peggy, glancing at the sheet in her hand. Lurid sentences caught her eye. The ladies in the narrative seemed given to shrieking and fainting, while the gentlemen had a propensity for deadly combat. A sturdy strain of common sense in Peggy's make-up caused her lips to twitch over this cheap tragedy.

"It sounds silly," was Peggy's final verdict. "I don't believe it's worth anything, but, after all, it belongs to somebody, and whoever wrote it thinks it's nice, I suppose. And--well, at the worst, she can't do more than shut the door in my face."

She marched down the yard, head up and shoulders back, in soldier fashion. Indeed Peggy felt very much as if she were leading a charge. Like most popular people, Peggy shrank from discourtesy. She was so accustomed to being liked that any indication of unfriendliness came with a sense of shock. The girl who had refused one neighborly kindness in so unpleasant a fashion was not likely to have undergone a change of heart in a little over twenty-four hours.

With a sense of bracing herself to face the worst, Peggy knocked at the kitchen door and stood waiting. Elaine herself answered the summons. The look which crossed her face seemed to say, "What, you here again?" but Peggy did not wait for her to put the ungracious sentiment into words.

"I don't know whether this belongs to you or not," she said hastily, "but I

thought perhaps it did, because hardly anybody on the Terrace has a typewriter." She handed the sheet to Elaine and prepared to back away.

But Elaine's formality had vanished with the understanding of Peggy's errand. "Page six," she exclaimed in tones of dismay, "O, I wonder where the rest are."

"I didn't see but this one, but then, I didn't really look. When I came out on the porch my little niece had it in her hand. She said an angel brought it."

"An angel?" Elaine forgot her anxiety for a moment and laughed outright; a little bubbling laugh which did wonders in advancing the acquaintance of the two. Then her thoughts reverted to the paper, which in Peggy's opinion she prized unduly. "They must have blown out of one of the upstairs windows," she exclaimed.

"Perhaps only that one blew out. You look upstairs, and I'll see if there are any more scattered over the grass," Peggy suggested obligingly. As it happened, the search of both girls was successful. Elaine came downstairs, her hands full of sheets she had gathered from the floor, and out of the number only one proved to be missing. This one, numbered four, Peggy had found winding itself about the trunk of a spindling young peach tree in the front yard.

"Now let's count them again and be sure they're all here," Elaine said eagerly. "One, two, three, four."

"Five, six, seven, eight," concluded Peggy. "That's all, isn't it?"

"Yes, that's all. O, how lucky I am to find them."

"O, isn't it splendid."

The door opened and a tall lady looked in. A white veil was tied over her grey hair, and she wore black gloves. In one hand she carried a feather duster, and the helpless air with which she handled this domestic implement, caught Peggy's attention at once. The sight of Elaine and Peggy, beaming at each other across the typewritten sheets, seemed to startle the new-comer. She made a movement as if to draw back, halted irresolutely, and murmured something unintelligible. Elaine came to the rescue, blushing vividly, quite as if, Peggy said to herself, she had been caught doing something out of the way.

"Mamma, this is a neighbor of ours, Miss--I don't know your name, do I?" She looked a little surprised at the discovery.

"Peggy Raymond," said the owner of the name with promptness.

"And this is my mother, Mrs. Marshall." The introduction completed, Elaine hastened to explain Peggy's presence, and the other girl could not free herself of the feeling that she found it necessary to excuse as well as to explain.

"Just think, mamma! One of the sheets of my--I mean one of these sheets flew out of the window, and she brought it back to me. Wasn't I fortunate? And wasn't she kind?"

"We certainly are much indebted to Miss Raymond," Mrs. Marshall re-

marked with a stateliness which took Peggy's breath away. "I regret that it is necessary," she continued impressively, "to apologize for my appearance. After being accustomed to the supervision of a house full of servants throughout married life it is extremely humiliating to me to be discovered engaged in the work of a parlor maid."

Peggy could think of no suitable reply to this speech. She perceived that Mrs. Marshall was one of the people who, having "come down in the world," persist in flaunting in the face of their acquaintances recollections of their past grandeur. She said hastily that nobody ever called her Miss Raymond, and she wanted to be Peggy to her new neighbors as well as to the rest of the Terrace. Then she excused herself, on the ground that she must look after Dorothy, while Elaine followed her to the door to say again, "I'm so much obliged. I can't tell you how much I thank you."

Dorothy was sitting on the porch steps, a subdued little figure. Her hair, crinkling tightly after its recent washing, stood out in all directions, giving it the appearance of a tuft of thistle-down just ready to fly away.

Peggy felt the fluffy golden crown thoughtfully. "Dry as the Desert of Sahara, isn't it?"

Dorothy compressed her lips and blinked. She strongly objected to being addressed in language beyond her comprehension, perhaps because she always suspected the people who used these terms of trying to make fun of her.

"And as long as your hair is dry, and your dress is clean, I've an idea, Dorothy darling. How would you like to go to the Park and hunt up the girls? They'll have had luncheon before we get there, but there'll be a-plenty left. There always is."

"Aunt Peggy!" screamed Dorothy, climbing to her feet with undignified haste. "I like you better'n butter-scotch, and better'n pink tooth-powder. Let's hurry."

And hurry they did. And which of the two enjoyed the gaieties of the picnic more, the big girl or the little one, it would be hard to say. But underneath Peggy's lightness of heart, and whole-souled participation in the afternoon's fun, a pleasant undercurrent of thought ran like a hidden stream, the consciousness that at last she had succeeded in establishing friendly relations with the girl next door.

CHAPTER IV

A BUSY AFTERNOON

The breeze which had lingered by the honeysuckle, climbing over the back porch of the Raymond cottage, did not carry to the next-door neighbors any whiffs of refreshing fragrance. For before it crossed the hedge, which marked the boundary line between the two places, it had picked up an odor very different. And Peggy Raymond's paint-pot was responsible.

Peggy was arrayed in what she called her regimentals. They consisted of an old shirtwaist, the sleeves cut off at the elbows, a calico skirt, and a pair of shabby shoes, all of which articles were splashed with paint of different colors. The landscape which hung in Peggy's mother's room, and which had been the cause of so much discussion in the family, was not responsible for any part of this rainbow effect. When Peggy donned her "regimentals," her artistic instincts took an entirely different turn.

Standing upon several newspapers, spread out for the protection of the grass in the Raymond back yard, was a chair. It was a rather dilapidated chair, judged from the standpoint of an unbiassed spectator. Its cane seat had long ceased to be practical for purposes of support, and its battered, scarred appearance suggested that it had been used as a target for missiles singularly effective. But Peggy regarded it with a look of pleased anticipation, not unmixed with pride.

The can of paint, which, lending its odor to the breeze, had quite submerged the fragrance of the honeysuckle, stood conveniently near the chair, and Peggy was absorbed in transferring the contents of the one to the battered surface of the other. The first results of the transference did not impress the beholder as successful, for the chair had been painted black in the first place, and the original hue, showing distinctly through the coat of paint, suggested a brown cheek veiled in white. But, undisturbed by her failure to produce the effect she wanted, without any irritating delays, Peggy worked away cheerily, humming a tune under her breath, and so absorbed was she in her task that she did not hear a light step coming across the grass. Her first intimation that she was not alone was when a somewhat hesitating voice said, "I beg your pardon."

With a start Peggy looked up. At the sight of Elaine her face crinkled into a smile of such unmistakable pleasure that only a very peculiar person could have felt indifferent to being its exciting cause.

"Why, it's you, isn't it?" exclaimed Peggy radiantly, springing from her knees with a haste which came near to overturning the can of paint. "I can't ask you to take a chair, because the only chair there is is pretty well covered with paint by now. But I'll pull out the wheelbarrow--"

"O, I can't stay long enough to sit down," Elaine said hastily. She was on the point of saying more, but quite unconscious that she was interrupting, Peggy broke in.

"I suppose you wondered what I was doing. You see one of the chairs in

my bed-room went to pieces the other day. Amy was sitting on it at the time, and she was quite mortified. Amy is plump, and she decided right away that she wouldn't eat any more candy for six months, if she was getting so big that ordinary furniture wouldn't bear her weight." Peggy interrupted herself by an infectious laugh and chattered on, "And so I've got to have a new chair--"

"A *new* chair," repeated Elaine, surprise causing her to give a rather impolite emphasis to the adjective.

Peggy laughed again. "The new things for my room are a good deal like some folks' new dresses, the made-over, new kind, you know. But I almost think I like them all the better. Take this chair, for instance." Peggy indicated the article in question by a sweeping gesture of her paint brush. "It isn't much to look at just now."

"No!" Elaine acknowledged, apparently glad to find a point on which she could agree with Peggy. "It isn't."

"It'll have to have quite a number of coats," Peggy explained. "And when the paint is thick enough, so that the black doesn't show through, I'll tack a square of blue denim over the seat. If you put it on with braid and gilt-headed tacks, it is quite effective."

Elaine's start was not due to admiration for the glowing picture Peggy's words had conjured up, but rather to consternation over her own negligence. "O, I forgot!" she exclaimed, and hesitated. She was so plainly embarrassed that Peggy felt vaguely uncomfortable herself. But she did not have time to wonder why, before Elaine was launched on an explanation.

"Mamma sent me over to say that she objects to the smell of paint, and to ask if you would mind--"

Elaine hesitated again. Her air of confusion did not seem consistent with the impression Peggy had formed of her. As for Peggy herself, she was equally divided between sympathy for the bearer of the message, and regret over her interrupted task.

"I suppose I should have stopped to think which way the wind was blowing," she said quickly. "But somehow I never can remember that some people dislike the smell of paint. It seems so clean, and it always makes me think how nice things are going to look when you are done." She studied the unfinished chair, and suppressed a sigh. "I'll just dab a little more paint on this round, and then I'll set it in the woodshed and wait till the wind is from the east."

Peggy gave her attention to a particularly battered portion of the chair's anatomy, till she was aroused from her absorption by a question. The voice which asked it was intense, almost tragically so, in striking contrast to the serenity of the afternoon.

"Don't you hate, hate, *hate* to be poor?"

A big spot of white paint added itself to the decoration of the calico skirt, as Peggy stared up at her interrogator. "Why, I don't know," she acknowledged, "I guess I never thought about it."

"Not thought about it? Why, how can you help it when you have to do things like this?" Elaine made a scornful gesture, in the direction of the woe-begone chair. "Just suppose that all you had to do when you wanted something new was to go and buy it."

Peggy laughed a little. "I'm afraid my imagination isn't equal to that," she replied cheerily. "And, anyway, this sort of thing is such fun!"

"Fun!" echoed Elaine, with an incredulous gasp.

"Why, yes! To take something like this chair and fix it up so that it is useful and pretty is real fun. And so are lots of things about housework. There's cooking, now."

"I don't know a thing about cooking." Elaine had moved a little nearer Peggy, as if afraid of losing something. Her air of interest was unmistakable.

"Well, I love it all, but the nicest part, I think, is taking the left-overs, you know, the cold potatoes, and the ends of the steak, and fixing them up into real nice appetizing dishes."

"I tried getting luncheon to-day," Elaine acknowledged. "I was going to make an omelette because I thought that would be easy. It burned to start with, and then instead of puffing up light, it flattened out till it was just like india-rubber. And Mamma can't cook any better. I don't know what we are going to do."

Peggy looked sympathetically at the troubled face beside her. "Why, if you'd like," she began, then hesitated, remembering her past experience. But having started the sentence there seemed no way out of finishing it. "I'll be glad to show you all I know," she ended with a gulp.

Apparently the present Elaine, staring moodily at Peggy's handiwork, bore little resemblance to the Elaine who had frigidly declined the cinnamon rolls. She drew a long, sighing breath, "I'd like to learn," she replied. "But I'm afraid I'd be dreadfully stupid about it."

It was Peggy's habit to strike while the iron was hot. "It's Sally's day out," she said. "I'm going to get supper. Wouldn't you like a lesson this afternoon?"

"Are you sure it wouldn't be a bother?"

Peggy's ears had not deceived her. The friendly offer had not been declined. With a face as radiant as if she had just received notification of a legacy, she hurried to make arrangements with her prospective pupil.

"Come over about four. That'll give us lots of time for experiments." She carried the half-painted chair into the woodshed in a jubilant mood, which was rather remarkable considering that she had been prevented from finishing the task on which she had started. Lake all energetic people Peggy detested interruptions.

But this was too much of a red-letter day for her to allow herself to be depressed by trifles.

Promptly at four Elaine presented herself, wearing over her black serge dress a little embroidered apron, about the size of a pocket-handkerchief. Peggy regarded the lace-edged affair with an amazement which Elaine mistook for admiration.

"Pretty, isn't it?" she said, glancing down at it complacently. "It was a Christmas present."

"It would be fine for a chafing-dish supper," Peggy returned, feeling that if she were to act as Elaine's instructor she must begin with the fundamentals. "Chafing dishes and the aprons that go with them are all right for fun, but, when it comes to real business, there's nothing like a good range and a big apron. I'll lend you one of mine."

Elaine, enveloped in a long apron which fell to the bottom of her skirt, was soon being initiated into some of the preliminary mysteries of household economy. "There are five of us Raymonds to get supper for," Peggy said counting them off on her fingers. "And Dick's always so hungry that he counts for two. You'll stay, won't you?"

"O, I'd better not. I don't know anybody but you."

"That'll be the best way to get acquainted. And, besides, if you help with the cooking, you ought to help eat the things. That's half the fun. I don't know how anybody can be a good cook who hasn't got a good appetite. I simply adore the things I make."

After a careful examination of the refrigerator the supper was planned. There had been baked fish for dinner, and the remnants, Peggy explained to the respectfully attentive Elaine, arranged in a baking dish, with cream sauce between the layers and crumbs on top, would be even more delicious than the fish in its original state. Peggy also decided on baking powder biscuits. "They're such handy things," she said. "And you can stir them up so quickly and keep on baking as long as anybody is hungry; so they're one of the very first things you should learn to make."

Working with Peggy, Elaine began to understand why she found everything "fun." The neat, pleasant kitchen had a charm of its own. There was an agreeable excitement about the business of evolving a palatable supper from materials which the eye of inexperience had found unpromising. Elaine asked a great many questions, helped a little, in an awkward fashion, which unkind critics would have pronounced a hindrance rather than an aid, and was conscious of a steadily increasing respect for this deft-handed girl who knew so well what she wanted to do and how to do it.

The telephone bell rang while Peggy was sifting out the flour for the biscuits.

She dusted her hands, and went to answer it. "Very well, father," Elaine heard her say, and she was smiling when she came running back.

"We're going to have company," she announced to Elaine as if the news were pleasant. "A Mr. White, one of father's friends." She reflected a moment, frowning thoughtfully. "I guess we'll put some potatoes in the oven to bake. There'll be time enough if we pick out small ones, and there's plenty of the fruit cake."

The potatoes were washed hastily and consigned to the oven, and Peggy sifted out a little more flour. Then the door bell rang and there was a sound of voices in the hall. A moment later Peggy's mother slipped into the kitchen and shut the door behind her.

"Peggy, old Mr. and Mrs. Andrews have just come. I suppose they'll stay for supper. Have you got enough for two more?"

"O, yes. We'll have enough," Peggy answered blithely.

"Don't you want me to help you?"

"O, I'm getting on finely with my neighbor's assistance. You can go back and entertain the company." As her mother slipped away, looking relieved, Peggy added to Elaine, "I didn't know what I was getting you into when I asked you over this afternoon."

"Will there really be enough for so many?" demanded Elaine, feeling rather oppressed by the weight of these unusual responsibilities.

"I've had a brilliant idea; I'm going to heat some maple syrup. People like it with hot biscuit, and, besides, it takes off the edge of their appetite," Peggy explained shamelessly. "But we shall have to put an extra leaf in the table, I'm afraid."

At six o'clock everything was ready. A pleasant mixture of odors pervaded the house, the fragrance of coffee being most in evidence. Peggy had just taken a pan of biscuit from the oven, and was calling Elaine's attention to their flaky lightness, when Dick put his head through the door.

"Say, Peg--"

"O, is that you, Dick? This is our new neighbor, Elaine Marshall."

Dick gave a shy little bob of his head in Elaine's direction. "Say, Peg," he repeated.

"Yes, dear."

"Looney Batezell's mother has gone somewhere to supper, and his father, too, and the hired girl won't fuss to fix him anything decent, and so I just told him to come over here to supper."

Elaine waited for the explosion that did not come. "Very well," Peggy said resignedly. As the door closed and Dick's footsteps echoed along the hall, she flung a twinkle in Elaine's direction. "It never rains but it pours," she quoted.

"Why, I don't see--" Elaine checked herself, reflecting that it was not nec-

essary for the matter to be explained to her satisfaction. But Peggy took it on herself to reply to the unspoken remonstrance.

"I suppose I might have told Dick he couldn't have Looney to-night. But it's only one more and it doesn't really make much difference. Besides we like to have Dick feel that his friends are welcome. When you are bringing up a boy," concluded Peggy, laughing, and still very much in earnest, "you have to think of so many things."

Peggy did not eat her supper that evening till the others had finished. She waited on the table, and baked biscuit, and if there was anything more remarkable than the celerity with which the biscuit plates were cleared, it was the promptness with which they were refilled, each time with flaky, smoking-hot biscuits, which fairly melted in one's mouth. Only in one respect had Peggy miscalculated, and that was when she remarked that the maple syrup would take off the edge of her guests' appetites. To all appearances it only whetted them to a more razor-like keenness.

But everybody was satisfied at last, and Peggy ate her own supper, her cheerfulness unimpaired by the fact that the baking dish had been scraped clean before her turn came, and that her baked potato was overdone. She protested against Elaine's determination to stay and help her with the dishes, but Elaine was firm.

"It's only fair, as part payment for my lesson. And, besides, I dare say I need to learn things about washing dishes as well as cooking."

As a matter of fact, Elaine had learned several things that afternoon, and the secret of making baking-powder biscuits was not perhaps the most important. She had seen a girl not far from her own age equal to an emergency which older housekeepers would have found trying, keeping her head clear and temper unruffled. Elaine was beginning to understand that it was not what Peggy did, so much as her way of doing it, that set her apart.

"I feel real selfish keeping you so long," Peggy declared, when the last dish was in its place. "Your poor mother will have been awfully lonely."

"O, no, she--" Elaine paused with an air of checking herself on the verge of an admission. "Mamma doesn't mind being alone," she ended, but Peggy was quite sure that this was not what she had intended to say.

Peggy stood in the doorway while her new friend and pupil crossed the yard, passed through the opening in the hedge and tried her own door. It was locked, and Elaine knocked and waited till her mother came to let her in. As the door opened Elaine turned and waved a good night to the figure framed in light, watching to be sure that she was safely home.

As Peggy returned the greeting, something odd happened. In the room above a shade was lowered. All that Peggy saw was an extended arm and a white

hand pulling down the shade, but she stood staring as if this had been a most out-of-the-way proceeding.

"Queer thing," mused Peggy. "Elaine and her mother are downstairs at the door, and they haven't any servant, and I'm sure I thought Mrs. Marshall was alone this evening."

She looked blankly at the non-committal shade, then remembered her morning's lessons, and, closing the door, ran upstairs to her school books. By bed-time she had forgotten to wonder whose hand had lowered the shade in that upstairs room.

CHAPTER V

A HALLOWE'EN PARTY

While Peggy's acquaintance with Elaine had been steadily progressing, the other girls were little farther along than on the memorable morning when they welcomed the wrong hack. Priscilla had begun to speak of "Peggy's friend" with an intonation which showed resentment.

"It's because we live next to each other, I suppose," said Peggy, who never imagined that her own sunniness of disposition could prove a magnet to attract friends and was always devising explanations for their abundance. "You haven't had a fair chance. I believe I'll give a Hallowe'en party, so that Elaine can get acquainted with the rest of you."

The suggestion awakened an enthusiasm that had little connection with Elaine. Peggy's parties were simple affairs, old-fashioned, one might call them. There was no orchestra playing behind a screen of palms, no elaborate refreshments, no display of pretty frocks. Indeed Peggy very often said, "Don't put on your good clothes; you might hurt them." Many a girl of Peggy's age who regards herself as a young lady would turn up her nose at one of Peggy's parties, where everybody came at eight o'clock and went home correspondingly early, and where nobody made an effort to appear grown up. But since Peggy's guests invariably had a good time, "the best time ever," they were likely to declare, Peggy was entirely satisfied.

Elaine, being new to the traditions of the Terrace, opened her eyes when Peggy tendered her an invitation across the hedge. "A Hallowe'en party," she repeated, a question in her voice. "Isn't that rather--"

"Rather what?" inquired Peggy with such good-natured curiosity that Elaine almost regretted her beginning.

"O, nothing. Only a Hallowe'en party seems rather childish, don't you think?"

"I didn't think anything about it, except that it was fun," Peggy answered tranquilly. And then she added the warning so likely to accompany Peggy's invitations, "Don't wear your good clothes."

"What!"

"I mean don't wear anything good enough to hurt."

"I haven't anything particularly nice," said Elaine with dignity, "but if I'm going to a party where I'll meet a lot of strangers I naturally shall wear my best." She looked at Peggy half resentfully, half perplexedly, reflecting as she did so that Peggy was the sort of girl who could wear an old dress to a party and have a good time in spite of it. But, then, Peggy wasn't like other people. A very short residence on the Terrace had been long enough to bring Elaine to this conclusion.

Peggy was very busy the next ten days. She had never been accustomed to much spending money, and she had early learned that for the drawback of a slender purse there is abundant compensation in cleverness and ingenuity. Whatever pleasure Peggy's parties gave her friends, she enjoyed them doubly, for she had the pleasure of preparation along with the other. If a bubbling laugh escaped over the transom of Peggy's room, when she was supposed to be abed and asleep, some member of the household was sure to say, "Peggy's got a new idea," and to smile in sympathy.

That some busy brain had been evolving ideas, and that busy hands had been carrying them out, was evident enough on the night of the thirty-first. The light was turned low in the hall, and a sheeted figure at the door welcomed each comer with extended hand. The ceremony of hand-shaking was generally followed by little shrill squeals on the part of the arrivals, and voluble exclamations.

[image]

"A SHEETED FIGURE AT THE DOOR WELCOMED EACH COMER WITH EXTENDED HAND."

Elaine, coming in alone, and holding her head very high, distinguished herself by not screaming when the clammy hand touched hers, though she jumped, without any question. There was an unearthly chill about that hand, which, coupled with the sepulchral white garments and the dark eyes showing through holes edged with red, produced a singular shivery feeling along Elaine's spine.

"It's Dick, I guess," said the girl who had entered just ahead of Elaine, plunging into conversation without waiting for an introduction. "He's got on gloves, wet chamois-skin gloves, but who would imagine that it would feel so ghastly? Don't you love to have your blood run cold?" Fortunately Elaine was spared the necessity of answering that question by encountering Peggy, who gave both arrivals a rapturous squeeze and bore them off to her room to remove their wraps.

The Raymond living-room had been transformed in honor of Peggy's party. Jack-o'-lanterns grinned from the mantel and the book-cases. A tub of water, Elaine noticed with disapproval, occupied the centre of the room. Hung over the grate was an old iron kettle, in whose depths something silvery bubbled responsive to the heat below. The chairs set back against the wall were filled with laughing girls; for, in spite of Peggy's repeated warnings that Elaine was not to be late, she was the last arrival.

"We'll start with the lead, that's boiling so nicely, and perhaps lead boils away, just as water does." Peggy brought out a long-handled tin spoon, and a basin filled with water. "Come, Ruth," she commanded.

"O, let somebody else take her turn first," pleaded Ruth, but half a dozen hands pushed her forward. Cautiously she ladled a little of the melted lead into the water. Hissing it fell to the bottom of the basin, taking shape as it cooled. The girls crowded about to read the augury.

"Ruth!" Peggy's voice was preternaturally solemn. "It's awful, but it looks to me like three balls. Do you suppose you are going to marry a pawn-broker?"

"O, horrors!" cried Ruth, aghast. Milly Weston patted her shoulder comfortingly.

"Don't you believe it. I can see leaves and branches, too. Those three balls are fruit; oranges probably. That means you're going to have an orange ranch in California or Florida, and make lots of money."

The rest of the fortune telling proved equally cheerful. The fantastic shapes assumed by the lead in cooling could be interpreted in a variety of ways. While Priscilla insisted that fate had moulded the lead she let fall into the shape of the horn of plenty, which, of course, would signify prosperity, Peggy was positive that the lead had taken the form of a ship, and signified a voyage, while some of the girls saw a fish in the curved shape, and advanced ingenious theories as to its meaning.

There was no disagreement as to Elaine's fortune. The lead took the form of a violin, and Peggy triumphantly prophesied that her new friend would make a success in music. Elaine smiled with a sense of superiority, as one who has outgrown childish things, but she could not help being glad of the violin, in place of the rolling-pin Peggy had claimed for herself, and which she considered argued skill in the domestic arts. Though Elaine was trying hard to put Peggy's

lessons into execution she had not got beyond the point of regarding housework as drudgery.

By the time the supply of lead was exhausted the company was ready for something else. Into the tub filled with water Peggy dropped three apples, which bobbed against one another sociably and then went sailing off in different directions.

"O, dear me, Peggy," Amy cried reproachfully, "I've got the loveliest wave in my hair, and it would have lasted a week if it wasn't for you. I always get down to the bottom of the tub when I bob for apples and look like a wet kitten for the rest of the evening."

"I've had pity on your hair, honey," Peggy laughed, with an approving pat of Amy's fair locks. "It looks much too nice to spoil." She brought a bow and arrow from the adjoining room. "Instead of bobbing for apples," she explained, "you try to hit them with the arrow. The yellow apple stands for wealth, the red one for health, and the green for happiness. See! Dick fixed something sharp in the end of the arrow so it would stick."

The girls gathered around to admire, then drew off, while Amy made her first attempt in archery. The cord twanged as the arrow sped on its way. There was a shriek from the girls on Amy's right.

"Oh! Oh!" screamed Blanche Estabrook cowering and clutching frantically at the girl who stood next her. "She's hit me."

It was only too true, and considerable argument was needed to convince Blanche that the injury was not serious. As a matter of fact, the arrow had pierced the bow of blue ribbon surmounting her knot of yellow curls, and hung dangling. What with the agonized exclamations of Amy, horrified over the thought of what might have happened, and the chatter of the other girls, trying to explain to Blanche that she couldn't possibly be hurt, Peggy had some difficulty in restoring order.

"The trouble was just here, Amy," she explained to her friend. "You took aim as carefully as could be, and then, just at the last, you shut your eyes. Now, it stands to reason you can't hit a mark with your eyes shut."

"You can hit a mark," corrected Priscilla, "but not the right one."

Poor Amy submitted to her friend's mild reproof without attempting to defend herself, and withdrew to the corner in a very subdued mood. The following archers were more successful. Many times, it is true, the arrow fell splashing into the water, or stuck quivering in the sides of the tub, but, occasionally, it pierced one of the three lucky targets, and on such occasions the whole company shouted joyfully. Elaine was one of the fortunate archers. When her arrow pierced the apple which stood for happiness her lips curled a trifle; yet down in her heart she was conscious of an inconsistent wish that the green apple might be a true

prophet. Happiness! With a little ungirlish sigh Elaine wondered if she was to find it on Friendly Terrace.

It was Amy's unlucky night. A little later, twelve colored candles, each standing upright in its own tiny candle-stick, were ranged the length of the long hall, at intervals of two or three feet, burning away like so many miniature light-houses. "These stand for the months," explained Peggy; "the first one is November, and then December, and so on around the year. If you jump over them without putting them out, you'll have good luck all the year."

"And if you put them out?" inquired Amy anxiously.

"Every candle that goes out means bad luck for that particular month. Come, Priscilla. You try it first."

In spite of her height, Priscilla was as light on her feet as a fairy. Drawing her skirts around her, she went hopping down the hall so lightly that she left the whole twelve candles burning behind her. The applause this feat called forth was less enthusiastic than it would have been a little later, when the other girls had learned by experience the difficulties in the way of duplicating Priscilla's performance.

While Blanche was lamenting over the fact that the three candles which stood for the summer months had been extinguished, which she interpreted to mean that she was to be disappointed in certain cherished vacation plans, Amy came forward to try her fate. Clutching her skirts frantically, she jumped over the first candle, coming down with a thump which fairly shook the house, while the cheery little flame which stood for November blinked in astonishment and promptly went out. Ten times did Amy repeat this feat. When she reached the end of the hall only one of the twelve candles remained lighted, and the girls were in peals of laughter.

"'Tis the last rose of summer left blooming alone,'" Peggy quoted tragically, but Amy was in no mood to see the humor of the situation.

"Did you ever hear of anything so dreadful?" she moaned. "What a year! Only one lucky month in it."

The girls laughed again at her horrified tone, and Peggy crossed the room and shook her playfully.

"You're actually pale, you ridiculous, superstitious creature," she said severely. "As if it wasn't all a joke. I guess we'll have some refreshments now to revive you."

The refreshments were of the simplest sort; nuts and apples, with plates of home-made candy, but they added vastly to the evening's entertainment. The chestnuts were placed in pairs on the coals of the grate fire, and when they bounded apart, as the most of them did, great excitement developed in the little company. From the English walnuts, tiny vessels were constructed and launched

in couples on the troubled waters of the tub. If the little craft stuck together in their voyage across, the omen was counted a good one, while their parting company was hailed with lamentation.

All this gaiety had taken time. The hands of the clock were pointing to half past eleven. "The question is," said Peggy solemnly, "who's to be the one to go down the cellar-stairs."

Several of the girls shuddered, but no one volunteered. "It won't be me," cried Amy, excitement rendering her defiant of grammar. "I wouldn't do it for the world; would you?" she added, finding Elaine's eyes fixed on her curiously.

"Do what? I don't understand."

"Why, just as the clock is striking twelve, you go down the cellar-stairs, with a candle in one hand and a mirror in the other."

"You go down backward," Ruth reminded her.

"O, yes. You must walk backward. And when you get to the bottom of the stairs you set the mirror down somewhere and the candle in front of it, and begin to eat an apple."

Apparently the solemnity of the proceeding was failing to make due impression on Elaine. Amy's voice became thrillingly mysterious.

"You must look and look into the mirror as hard as you can, all the time that you're eating the apple. And, before you've finished, a face will be looking over your shoulder. O my!" Amy indulged in a prolonged shiver.

"I wouldn't do it for worlds," she repeated.

"How odd! I shouldn't mind it at all," said Elaine.

"Why, then you can do it," Peggy cried. "You're just the one. Light that red candle, Priscilla. No, not that. The largest one. Here's your mirror and your apple, and you must be ready to start down the stairs the minute the clock begins to strike twelve."

"It's a pretty big apple, considering what I've had already," laughed Elaine. "Is it necessary to eat it all?"

Peggy assured her that this was very necessary, that even the core must be disposed of, but Amy cast upon the daring stranger a glance of unfeigned admiration. "Isn't she brave?" she said to Blanche, in an undertone, and a little assenting murmur went the rounds. Few people are displeased by earning a reputation for heroism cheaply, and Elaine was smiling good-humoredly as she took her stand in front of the cellar door, the mirror in one hand, and the lighted candle in the other, while she held the apple in her teeth, Peggy assuring her gravely that this was indispensable to the success of the charm.

The grandfather's clock in the hall began to strike in its usual deliberate fashion. Peggy swung the door open and closed it again as Elaine began her hesitating descent into the darkness. At the bottom of the stairs she found two

boxes placed in evident preparation for the ceremony, the taller against the wall, the lower just in front of it. Elaine set down the mirror, placed the candle beside it, and, seating herself on the smaller box, began to eat her apple.

It was very still upstairs. Elaine wondered smilingly how it was possible for so many chatterboxes to preserve so protracted a silence. The Friendly Terrace girls were a jolly crowd, that was certain, especially Peggy. Elaine's heart warmed as she thought of the stranger who had bidden her welcome as if she were already a friend. If there were more people in the world like Peggy--

The trend of her thought broke off sharply. The candle must have flickered. That was the explanation of the odd appearance in the mirror. She leaned forward and the apple dropped from her hand, and bumped to the cellar floor. From the dimly lighted disk, two eyes looked back at her.

In the momentary confusion of her ideas, Elaine was conscious only of a deep-rooted resentment against Amy. It was her foolish talk and her shivers which had got on her nerves and was responsible for this wild fancy. And while her common sense struggled to keep its supremacy over her growing panic, the eyes rolled in the mirror, as if a head had turned, and something brushed her cheek.

Elaine's shrieks were answered by a chorus of screams from the room above. There was a wild rush of feet and the cellar door was flung open. Elaine could hear Amy's uplifted voice declaring, "She's seen something! I tell you she's seen something!" As Peggy rushed madly down the stairs to the rescue of her guest, a big tawny shape bounded to meet her.

"Get out of the way, Taffy. Get out!" Peggy commanded impatiently, and the dog whined his disappointment at such a greeting. But Elaine, when Peggy reached her, was laughing and crying together.

"You poor darling!" Peggy flung her arms about her friend and glared defiantly into the darkness. "What happened? Did you see anything?"

"It must have been the--the dog," sobbed Elaine. "He came up be-behind me so softly, I didn't hear him, and I saw his eyes in the mirror. I d-didn't know he was down here."

By the time the two had got upstairs, merriment had replaced consternation among Peggy's guests. The appearance of Taffy, waving a triumphant yellow tail, suggested the explanation of the mystery, rather to the disappointment of some whose expectations had been so highly keyed that the truth seemed really commonplace. The appearance of Elaine, her lashes moist, and her lips still trembling, was the signal for friendly advances on the part of all. The girls gathered about the crestfallen heroine, patted her, petted her, praised her courage in attempting such an adventure, and assured her that none of them would have been brave enough to try it. Occasionally a hint of patronage peeped through the comfort, and Elaine

was made aware that she had forfeited her reputation for courage almost as soon as she had made it. But, on the whole, the kindliness was comforting to a girl who carried a sore spot in her inmost heart, and in spite of the untoward ending Elaine carried home a very pleasant impression of her first party on Friendly Terrace.

CHAPTER VI

ELAINE HAS VISITORS

It was Priscilla who, on the way home from school the next day, suggested stopping to see if Elaine had quite recovered from the effects of the Hallowe'en party. She made the remark to Peggy, but Amy, who with Ruth was walking just behind the others, took it on herself to answer.

"Yes, that was just what I was thinking. It wouldn't be any more than neighborly after her fright, and all the rest of it."

Priscilla choked down an exasperated sigh. She said to herself it was strange Amy couldn't realize that there might be occasions when one wanted Peggy to one's self. At the same time it was not altogether Amy's obtuseness which was responsible for the difficulty of monopolizing Peggy's society. Peggy herself, with her trick of liking everybody, and expecting all her friends to like one another, made monopoly difficult, if not impossible.

Accordingly four girls, instead of two, turned in at the Marshall cottage. The chatter of voices on the porch told Elaine that she had visitors and she came to the door in something of a flutter, for, with all her air of self-sufficiency, Elaine was shy at heart, as is often the case with people who hold their acquaintances at arms' length. She was uncertain, as she admitted the quartet, whether or not to ask them into the parlor, but Peggy, who had caught sight of Mrs. Marshall seated in great state in the living-room, and apparently absorbed in the contemplation of a steel-engraving over the mantel, settled the question by bearing down upon the engrossed lady and giving her a hearty greeting.

Mrs. Marshall welcomed her daughter's visitors with an air nicely balanced between cordiality and condescension. Nearly everything that Mrs. Marshall said and did conveyed the impression that she had seen better days, and that she would not submit to being judged by her present environment. Peggy, who had a perfect mania for cheering people, found Mrs. Marshall's air of melancholy a perpetual challenge, and, when Mrs. Marshall gave her a chance, she occasionally

succeeded in bringing a smile to that lady's severe countenance, much to her own delight, and to Mrs. Marshall's astonishment.

She dropped into a chair next to Elaine's mother, and addressed her as soon as the introductions were over. "I hope you weren't lonely last evening, Mrs. Marshall, with Elaine away."

"I am used to loneliness, Miss Margaret," Mrs. Marshall returned pensively. "It is one of the many hard things to which I am now forced to accustom myself. When I was Elaine's age--"

Peggy resigned herself to listen to a story of past glories while the other girls plunged into a discussion of the party. "What a fright we all had when you screamed!" Amy laughed. "But, of course, it was worse for you than for anybody else. Did you feel all right this morning?"

"I felt a little cheap," Elaine acknowledged with a smile, while her color rose, "That was all."

"You're not the only one to feel that way," Priscilla comforted her. "There were some sheepish boys at school this morning. My father is the high-school principal, you know."

"Yes, Peggy spoke of it."

"Well, in the middle of the night father thought he heard a little noise around the house and he dressed and went out to the stable. Everything seemed quiet, and he was just starting to go in again when he heard steps outside. He slipped into the carriage, just to see what would happen, and then the door opened and five or six boys came creeping in. They took hold of the shafts of the carriage and started off at a good trot, with father sitting perfectly quiet, not saying a word."

Priscilla stopped to laugh, and her audience, especially the girls who knew the actors in the little comedy, joined her heartily. Peggy, who was hearing of the splendors of Mrs. Marshall's coming-out party, to which festivity two hundred guests had been invited, cast a wistful glance in the direction of the laughing group, and then, with a twinge of conscience, gave redoubled attention to the tale of by-gone grandeur.

"They carried him out to the new part of town," said Priscilla, continuing her story, "and pulled the carriage over to a vacant lot. And they were feeling so well satisfied with themselves, when father spoke out from behind the curtains, in his very deepest voice. 'Thank you for the ride, boys,' he said. 'It has been very enjoyable! But I think you may take me home now.' Of course there wasn't anything else for them to do, and father rode home in state. He made them pull the carriage into the stable, and then he got out and locked the door and thanked them again, very politely. Father can keep as grave as a judge even when he is dying to laugh. But as soon as he got into the house he woke mother up to enjoy the joke. He just couldn't wait till morning."

"I guess you had your share of Hallowe'en pranks, didn't you?" asked Amy, turning to Elaine.

"Why, no. What made you think so?"

"When that carriage passed the house I woke up. It was a sort of uncanny noise, you know, wheels and footsteps, instead of horses' hoofs. I suspected that something queer happening and I jumped up and looked out of my window, but the carriage had gone before I could get there. But I saw somebody on your porch."

"The boys in this neighborhood were certainly on the rampage last night," observed Ruth.

"But this wasn't a boy," explained Amy. "It was a woman, or a girl, dressed in a long, loose dress, like a light wrapper."

"How mysterious that sounds," cried Priscilla, and Peggy, who, to her great relief, had reached the end of the coming-out party, put in her word. "It's something new for the girls of the Terrace to go out playing Hallowe'en tricks."

"But it wasn't a Hallowe'en trick. There wasn't anything out of order this morning," Elaine insisted sharply.

"It was something, anyway. I was as wide awake as I am now. It walked back and forth half a dozen times, while I stood looking, and then it seemed to disappear. O, girls, you don't suppose--"

Amy's eyes were opened in a half-frightened stare. A girl of good sense in many respects, she had a vein of superstition in her make-up which was one of her greatest weaknesses. Peggy broke into a ringing laugh.

"The Spook on the Porch," she cried, "or the Mystery of Friendly Terrace. O, Amy, what an imagination you have!"

"It wasn't imagination at all," Amy persisted stubbornly. "It was a woman or something--in a trailing dress. I wasn't scared a bit. I just thought it was a Hallowe'en prank."

"Don't you think it's a lot colder to-day?" asked Elaine of the company in general. Her tone was a little stiff, and Peggy, glancing in her direction, was surprised to see a flush of annoyance on her new friend's face. Mrs. Marshall, too, had an air of having heard enough about this nocturnal intruder. It was necessary to change the subject promptly, especially as Amy and Priscilla seemed disposed to fall into an argument as to what Amy had really seen.

"I haven't asked you yet if you'd help in our Bazar, have I?" exclaimed Peggy, addressing Elaine. "It's the tenth of this month. It was the tenth we decided on at last, wasn't it, Ruth?"

"Yes, the tenth," Ruth replied, and Priscilla took up the explanation. "It's for the Empty Stocking Club. We buy dolls with the money we make, and dress them afterward."

"And it's an awful lot of fun," said Peggy. "Fun all the way, first making

the things for the Bazar, and then the Bazar itself, and then buying the dolls and dressing them. And of course giving them to the children is the best fun of all." She looked at Elaine expectantly, but, to her surprise, Elaine hesitated.

"My daughter would have been very glad to help you when our circumstances were different," said Mrs. Marshall, coming to Elaine's assistance. "My family have always given largely to charity. Solicitors for philanthropic objects often said to my father, 'We like to come to you first, Mr. Elwell, because you always give so generously, and that inspires others.' And Mr. Marshall, before his business reverses, thought nothing of writing a check for a hundred dollars for a worthy cause."

"The trouble with me," said Elaine abruptly, "is that it is all I can do to help myself." She looked about the little circle, somewhat defiantly, and Peggy, who knew that this piece of confidence was not in the least like Elaine, felt a twinge of regret at having unintentionally forced her to make such an admission.

"You don't understand. Of course none of us can give big things," she explained hastily. "Now, last year, one of the best sellers at our Bazar was as simple as it could be, and it hardly cost anything. It was only a gingham belt, with two dangling tapes, and, at the end of each tape, a square of gingham padded for lifting things out of the oven. They really are the most convenient things; for, generally, when the cake's ready to come out, you can't find anything to lift it with, and so you take your apron, or else a dish towel. We sold them for twenty cents apiece and took orders for a lot more than we had ready."

"And, sometimes, you can make a dear little work-bag out of pieces you have in the house," suggested Ruth. "I made a real pretty one last year: don't you remember, Peggy? If I a piece of newspaper I could show you just how it was done. You can use scraps of silk and ribbon you wouldn't think were good for anything."

Somebody found the necessary newspaper, and Ruth hastily constructed a pattern of the article she had tried to describe, while Elaine listened, her color rising steadily. The girls had misunderstood her, and their efforts to show her how she could help without being at any expense added to her sense of humiliation. What she had really meant to imply was that a girl situated as she was, should be exempt from any obligations to help other people. Elaine looked upon herself as an object of sympathy. It was bad enough to face the prospect that one's own stocking would be empty at Christmas time--relatively empty, at least--but to be asked to help fill other stockings was adding insult to injury.

Yet this, hard as it was, did not cut as deeply as the suggestions the girls were now making, with the best intentions in the world. Poverty, from Elaine's standpoint, was equally a misfortune and a disgrace. She had confessed defiantly to being poor, without dreaming that her callers would take her at her word,

and proceed on the assumption that in her case economy was really a matter of importance. When Priscilla started in with a description of a hat-pin holder, the materials of which, she assured Elaine, impressively, wouldn't cost more than ten cents at the outside, Elaine felt that she had reached the limit of endurance.

"There!" she exclaimed as if the thought had just occurred to her. "I believe I have a little thing ready that I could contribute." She went to her room, a sense of triumph effacing the intolerable humiliation of the past few minutes. The sacrifice she was about to make was insignificant compared with her opportunity to silence her advisers, and to prove that in spite of the reverses with which the family had met, she could be as generous as anybody. The article for which Elaine was looking was put away carefully, wrapped in tissue paper. She looked at it with brightening eyes, and returned to her visitors almost jauntily.

"It's a little thing I made in the summer," she observed casually. "The Irish crochet is awfully popular, you know, and I think the pattern's rather pretty." With a carelessness almost too pronounced, she dropped her offering on Peggy's knee. "If that will do you any good, you're quite welcome to it."

Peggy was staring with all her eyes. "Why, Elaine! Why, girls! It's a collar. Real Irish crochet! Isn't it gorgeous!"

Such as it was, Elaine's triumph was complete. The girls broke into exclamations of admiration, exchanging bewildered glances as they did so.

"She made it herself. Isn't she a wonder? There won't be anything at the Bazar to compare with it."

"That ought to bring a splendid price. Just think of the dolls we can buy with all that money."

"It's *gorgeous*," repeated Peggy. She looked from the dainty article in her hand toward the giver. "Really, Elaine," she hesitated, "it's too nice. It's more than you ought to give."

An instant reappearance of Elaine's old hauteur convinced Peggy that she had blundered. "If I am going to give anything," Elaine said with dignity, "I want it to be nice."

The tactful Peggy abandoned her well-intentioned effort to prevent what she felt sure was a piece of reckless generosity. "Well, you've done it," she laughed. "It's pretty certain that we won't have anything else nearly as nice as this. And, Elaine, you'll help us the day of the Bazar, won't you? There'll be lots to do, selling the things, and serving the ice cream, and being nice to the people who come in."

Elaine having reinstated herself in her own eyes, by the character of her donation, graciously agreed to lend whatever assistance might be further required, and then everybody seemed to feel at the same moment that it was time to go. Priscilla excused herself on the ground of her lessons. "With your school principal for a father," she explained, "you can't afford to fail very often." Ruth remembered

that Graham was going to bring somebody home to supper. Amy made vague references to letters that must be written. They moved toward the door with less chatter and laughter than usually characterizes the farewells of girls of their age. At the foot of the walk they parted, Amy and Peggy walking on together, while the other two turned in the opposite direction.

"Say, Peggy!" Amy cast a sidelong glance at her companion. "Do you think Elaine is awfully generous?"

Peggy's eyes opened. "Why, it was very generous to give us that collar," she exclaimed. "You know that Irish lace--"

"O, yes, I know all about it." Under Amy's careless good nature a shrewdness of observation sometimes cropped out in a rather surprising fashion. "It was generous, if she cared about the Empty Stockings, but something in the way she did it made me feel as if it was mostly intended to impress us."

"O, Amy!" Peggy was unfeignedly shocked. Amy met her reproachful gaze and surrendered with a laugh.

"You funny old Peg!" she said disrespectfully. "Well, never mind *why* she did it. Our finances will get quite a boost, anyway. Good night." And as she crossed the street, she added with seeming irrelevance, "I'm sorry for anybody who makes such hard work of being poor."

CHAPTER VII

THE BAZAR

The next ten days were busy ones for the girls of the Terrace. It is true the Bazar had been more or less on their minds throughout the year, and many of them had devoted a generous share of their summer's leisure to preparation, but now industry had become epidemic. The girls met at one another's homes after school, and, busy as their tongues were, those nimble organs failed to outstrip the industrious fingers.

Elaine was not invited to any of these gatherings, for the girls all felt that she had done her full share, and that she would probably consider herself imposed on, if asked for further assistance. Dorothy, on the other hand, was an important figure at almost every meeting. To see Dorothy sewing together pieces of bright-colored calico, with stitches an inch long, was a constant incentive to industry, while her habit of waiting till an article was completed before deciding on the

use to which it should be put, enlivened the dullest hours. Dorothy scorned to ask advice; she simply put her small head on one side, studied the work of her hands thoughtfully, and, after wavering for five minutes between a doll's sunbonnet and a penwiper, would perhaps surprise the company by announcing that the nondescript article was a necktie for Aunt Peggy.

The Bazar was usually held at Ruth's home, as in the Wylie cottage two rooms, separated by folding-doors, could be thrown into one, while the front hall was of more generous proportions than in most of the houses of the Terrace. On the memorable Saturday designated on the calendar as the tenth, the Wylie establishment was a scene of activity suggesting a hive of bees at swarming time. Girls made their appearance laden with baskets and mysterious parcels. Graham Wylie, Ruth's tall brother, with Dick Raymond, and other boys of the neighborhood, made themselves useful bringing small tables and ferns, borrowed indiscriminately from anyone who would lend them.

Elaine, who had come over to help, had a more pleasant sense of "belonging" than had been hers at any time since the mud-splashed hack had deposited her at the door of the only vacant cottage on the Terrace. She had been assigned to assist with the decorations, and being a girl of excellent taste and original ideas, she gradually found herself taking charge, and directing the others. This was pleasant in itself, and the approving comments called forth by the arrangement of flags over the mantel, and the bunching of the palms and ferns in the front hall, brought an unwonted color to Elaine's cheeks and brightness to her eyes. Peggy, who was accomplishing as much as any other half-dozen of the workers, paused in her labors long enough to admire the decorative effects, including the remarkable transformation wrought in Elaine's case by a bright color and a cheery smile.

"To think she could be so pretty," Peggy said wonderingly, and then finding Graham at her elbow she started and colored high.

"That Marshall girl, you mean?" queried Graham, seemingly unaware of her confusion. "Yes, it does make a difference. Most of the time she looks a mixture of starch and vinegar that isn't particularly attractive. What ails her, anyway?"

"I don't know." It struck Peggy, as she replied, that all she knew of Elaine's affairs was singularly inadequate to account for the weary, disillusioned look which was the other girl's habitual expression. "You know they used to be quite well off," Peggy explained, as Graham helped her move a table which was taking up more than its share of the room. "I guess it's more comfortable never to have much, than to have it and lose it."

It was not till after one o'clock that everything was ready. The fancy work tables were in the front room, and the display proved that the loyalty of the Terrace girls to a good cause was not of the flash-in-the-pan variety. Many days of hard work were represented on those crowded tables, and, though the skill of the

workers varied, the average was commendable. Elaine's collar had the place of honor, with a background of black velvet to set off its delicately intricate pattern. In the back parlor were the candy and ice-cream tables, as well as the little tea-table, over which Priscilla was to preside, the latter being a concession to the old ladies who no longer possessed a "sweet tooth," and who shivered at the suggestion of ice cream in November.

The girls flew home to swallow a hasty dinner, without any very definite idea as to what they were eating, and then hurried themselves into their best clothes, and were back again a good half-hour before the advertised time for opening the Bazar. "From three to ten" the announcements had read, and when the grandfather's clock in the hall struck the first-named hour there was a general craning of necks, as if with the expectation of seeing a procession of patrons ascending the front steps. Nobody was in sight, however, and some faces assumed an expression of anxiety.

"Three o'clock and not a soul here," Ruth said tragically. "O, dear! I hope that somebody'll come after we've all worked so hard."

"There's a splendid concert at the Lyric this afternoon. I shouldn't wonder if that took a great many people who might have come here," observed Priscilla, with an air of being prepared for the worst.

"I thought all the time, that we should have some hand-bills," Amy exclaimed. "You tell people, and you put up notices in the drugstore, but that isn't enough. There ought to be hand-bills distributed the night before."

The spirits of the company were rapidly approaching the zero point when Peggy came to the rescue with one of her sunny suggestions, which appreciably raised the temperature. "Why, it's only three o'clock. People never come exactly on time to things of this sort." Then she recounted Dorothy's latest escapade and set them all to laughing.

But when the hands of the clock pointed to twenty minutes past three, Peggy's utmost efforts were unequal to the task of keeping up the spirits of the little crowd. Various explanations were advanced for the failure of the Bazar. Peggy's opinion was asked as to whether or not Murvin would take back the ice cream. And then the atmosphere of gloom was dissipated by the sound of the door-bell.

It was an old lady whom Dick Raymond, acting door-keeper, admitted to the Bazar, a rather shabby old lady, who walked with a limp, and had a market basket on her arm. It is doubtful whether her arrival would have been regarded as an important event anywhere outside of Mrs. Wylie's parlors. But at the sight of her rusty black bonnet the creases suddenly vanished from anxious faces and dimples appeared in their stead. She was the first arrival, and possessed all the mysterious charm that attaches itself to the first blue-bird or the first violet.

She was an appreciative old lady, too. She referred to the hand-painted paper-dolls, which formed the major part of Priscilla's contribution, as "pretty little images," and admired some crocheted wash-cloths, with pink edges, under the impression that they were a substantial sort of doily. Only when her attention was called to a drawnwork handkerchief did she become critical.

"Mine gets holes in 'em fast enough without beginnin' that way," said the old lady, laughing heartily at her own wit, and everybody laughed in sympathy. She wound up her exhaustive examination of all the articles displayed by the purchase of a holder and five cents' worth of peanut brittle. As she limped down the steps she met three or four ladies coming up, but not one of them elicited the enthusiasm which had been the spontaneous tribute to the first arrival.

By quarter after four the rooms were buzzing, and busy as Elaine was, she found opportunity to admire the resourcefulness of Peggy. It was Peggy who soothed the feelings of the girl who thought that they should have charged more for her bureau scarf, and who propitiated the patron who felt that she had paid more than was right for a hem-stitched towel. It was Peggy who came to the assistance of a perplexed "saleslady" who could not think how much change was due her customer, and who took charge of wrapping some peculiarly obstinate article, and it was also Peggy who found, for the lady who was aggrieved over discovering that something she wanted had been sold to another purchaser, a similar article which suited her just as well. Peggy seemed to have the faculty of being every where at once. She was equal to all the little crises of the occasion.

"I don't see how you manage it," Elaine said to her during a temporary lull in the proceedings, late in the afternoon. Compliments were rare on Elaine's lips, and Peggy, looking up, had no idea that she was being complimented. "Manage what?" she asked.

"O, helping everybody out, and smoothing everybody down, and the queer part is that you keep so cheerful about it."

Peggy smiled a little.

"The queer part, as you call it, is really the secret, if I've got any secret. If you keep cheerful and are polite, and don't lose your head, it's easy enough to get other folks to see things the way you do."

By six o'clock the girls were tired but triumphant. Peggy's cheery prophesies had been more than realized, and from eight to ten they were sure of another period of activity, which would, in all probability, empty their tables and fill their treasury. The workers hurried home for a supper, even more of a form than dinner had been, and were back on duty before there was any chance of new arrivals.

On the cheerful group, comparing notes as to the day's experiences and calculating the probable gains, by methods which brought startlingly diverse results, Ruth descended like a whirlwind. "Girls, the ice cream's gone."

"Gone!" echoed a blank chorus, and Peggy, as usual the first to rally, exclaimed, "Why, I don't see how that can be. We didn't have--"

"No, no, you don't understand," cried poor Ruth, wringing her hands. "We only used one freezer of ice cream this afternoon. But the other one, the big one, has disappeared."

"Stolen!" Priscilla gasped. "Well, anybody who's mean enough to steal from empty-stocking children!"

"That'll cut down our profits dreadfully," groaned Amy.

Peggy roused herself. "Maybe there's some mistake," she cried. "It almost seems as if there *must* be some mistake. Let's look outside."

There was a rush for the back door, despite Graham Wylie's philosophical suggestion that a ten-quart ice cream freezer was a difficult thing to mislay. The November night was starless and chilly, and most of the girls, after taking a disconsolate view of the landscape, withdrew shivering to the warmth within, to bemoan their misfortune. Perhaps Peggy found it harder to give up than most people do. She went down the walk to the alley, Graham following.

"It's such a big thing," observed Peggy over her shoulder, "that you wouldn't think it could get very far without attracting attention. You don't suppose--"

"Sh!" warned Graham suddenly, and both went forward on tiptoe. Further up the alley sounded a curious bumping noise. A murmur of voices broke the hush of the night.

Graham felt for the bolt of the back gate, found it already drawn, and smiled, well pleased. The voices outside were audible by now.

"Say, that's far enough."

"'Tain't far enough till it's inside, kid. You don't s'pose they's goin' to look fer ice cream in no alley, do you?"

Something bumped against the gate. Slowly it opened, and a capped head appeared. Then Graham pounced; there was a thud and a wild scampering, and Peggy flew to the rescue of the overturned freezer.

The two small boys who had walked into the trap were no match for the young collegian, who was training for the hundred yard dash next field day. If the boys had run in the same direction he would have had them both, but as one went east and the other west, he was obliged to make a choice. He came back holding at arm's length an urchin whose squirmings were the most extraordinary display of agility that Peggy could remember to have witnessed.

"Don't try to carry that freezer," exclaimed Graham, as he returned with his struggling captive. "We'll send some of the boys out for it. And now let's come inside and see what we've got here."

Graham's captive proved to be a small boy with carroty hair, innumerable freckles, and a square chin, which, at this moment, seemed possessed of sufficient

stubbornness to equip a regiment. His coat had at one time been too large for him, but had been fitted to his diminutive person by cutting the sleeves off at the elbows and pinning the surplus of the back over into a large plait by means of safety pins. His shoes were so large that Peggy no longer wondered at the peculiar flapping echo of the footsteps heard in the alley.

"Well, you young scamp!" Graham held his captive under the chandelier and scowled down upon him impressively. "You're making a nice early start, you are. Do you know where you're likely to end up, if you keep on this way?"

If the boy knew, he had no intention of telling. To all appearances he was both deaf and dumb. His mouth had become a straight, rather bluish line, above his defiant little chin.

"No tongue, eh? Well, I guess we can find a way to make you talk. Just step to the 'phone, one of you," added Graham over his shoulder, "and call up the police station."

There was a chorus of protests.

"O, no, Graham. He's so little."

"And we've got the ice cream back, Graham, so no harm's done."

Peggy flung herself into the discussion. "Why, Graham, he was bringing it back."

"Bringing it back," sneered Graham. "Why should he steal it, and then bring it back?" The logic was irresistible, but Peggy was a girl who never allowed logic to stand in the way of her facts.

"I don't know. But I know he was bringing it back. They were way up the alley when we heard them first, and they'd got to the gate and had it open, when you jumped at them."

The lids of the small prisoner fluttered, lifted, and dropped again, but in that instant a glance had sped straight as an arrow to Peggy. The eyes had uttered an appeal which the stubborn lips would not speak.

"You were bringing it back, weren't you?" Peggy exclaimed. "Tell us about it."

The boy squirmed, cast another furtive glance at Peggy, and seemed to find encouragement in her air of sympathetic attention. His mouth opened; and a hoarse voice exploded two words, as if they had been cannon crackers.

"Skinny said--" Then, apparently overcome by the effect of his beginning, he came to a full stop.

"That's right," Peggy encouraged him. "What was it Skinny said?"

Another period of squirming, as if the small figure were a corkscrew set to remove some obstruction to the free flow of speech, and as if a cork had really popped out, the explanation bubbled forth at last.

"Skinny said you was gettin' money for the empty stockin' kids, an' so--"

"And so you brought it back," exclaimed Peggy, including the entire company in her triumphant glance.

"Yes, Miss. I uster go to them shows myself," said the boy with an air suggesting that his youth was at least a score of years behind him. "They's all right, they is."

There was a certain honesty about the boy's manner, in spite of the transgression in which he had been detected, and this, coupled with the undeniable fact that he was returning the ice cream freezer when captured, resulted in a reversal of public sentiment. Little kindly murmurs passed from one to another, and even Graham did not have the heart to make further references to the police. "Well, youngster," he said gruffly, "guess you'd better skip. And just remember that you won't get off so easy the next time."

The boy's instantaneous acceptance of the permission had carried him as far as the next room when he was checked by Peggy. "Wait a minute," she cried, "I've got something for you." She met Graham's air of disapproving inquiry with a suggestion of defiance. "I'm going to give him a little ice cream," she explained.

"Well, I like that!" Graham was plainly indignant. "He's lucky not to be in the lock-up, and here you are petting and pampering him. That's just like a girl. You know perfectly," he scolded, as Peggy dished out the ice cream with a liberal hand, "that people who do things of that sort ought to be made to smart for it."

"I don't know," said Peggy over her shoulder. "Nobody made you smart when you Sophomores stole the ice cream at the Freshman banquet."

"O, that!" exclaimed Graham, reddening. "That was different."

"Yes," Peggy acknowledged generously, "It was different. As far as I know, you never took it back." And with this parting shot she carried the well-filled saucer to the boy waiting at the kitchen door.

The rapidity with which the ice cream disappeared was startling, to say the least. As a half-starved dog bolts his rations of raw meat so Peggy's protégé gulped down pink wedges of the unyielding dainty in a manner suggesting that his digestive apparatus must be of a peculiar and improved pattern. When the saucer was scraped clean he rolled his eyes in Peggy's direction in a manner which might have been intended to indicate gratitude, or which might be preliminary to a seizure of some kind.

[image]

"THE RAPIDITY WITH WHICH THE ICE CREAM DISAPPEARED WAS STARTLING, TO SAY THE LEAST.

"Do you feel all right?" asked Peggy in alarm.

"You bet," the hoarse voice assured her, adding, as an afterthought, "That stuff's out of sight."

Peggy forebore to explain that the rapidity with which the delicacy in question had been put out of sight was the ground of her uneasiness. "What is your name?" she inquired.

"Jimmy Dunn." The gray eyes met her own squarely and she was confirmed in her opinion that they were honest eyes.

"Well, Jimmy, it wasn't right for you to take our ice cream, but it was very--" Peggy searched for a word in the boy's vocabulary--"It was very white of you to bring it back. I like you and I hope I'll see you again. Good night."

The door swung ajar and the queer, ungainly little figure slipped through the opening. Then it turned. "Same to you," said the hoarse voice, and Peggy heard the big shoes clatter on the walk, as the wearer raced to the gate. And though that was the most successful Bazar the girls of the Terrace had ever held, and the spirit of self-congratulation ran high, perhaps the pleasantest memory that Peggy carried home with her was that exchange of compliments on the back doorsteps.

CHAPTER VIII

AT HOME WITH THE DUNNS

"I can't," said Peggy. "I've got to make a call after school."

Priscilla, who had suggested a trip to the public library, to look up some of the history references for the next day, glanced at her friend askance. "O," she said in a voice of deep meaning, "I can't imagine what you see in that Elaine Marshall."

"Can't you?" Peggy's tone was cheery.

"O, she's well enough. But to choose her for an intimate friend! You're the only one of us who really likes her, you know."

"It's lucky I like her so much, then," suggested Peggy, still reprehensibly cheerful.

"O, yes, it's lucky for her. Nobody would deny that. But as far as you're concerned, Peggy, I don't know. Of course the more intimate you get with her, the less you see-- Now, Peggy Raymond, I'd like to know what you're laughing at."

Peggy's pent-up chuckle had broken in on the conversation with rather

startling effect. As a tease, Peggy was not an unqualified success, since she never had the heart to carry her teasing to the climax. "I was only laughing at your dragging Elaine into it," she explained blithely. "I'm not going to see her. I'm going to call on the Dunns."

Priscilla wavered between offence and curiosity. Peggy tipped the balance by giving her friend's arm a good-natured squeeze.

"The Dunns," repeated Priscilla hastily, as if glad to get away from the previous topic of conversation. "Where do they live?"

"Glen Echo Avenue."

"Pretty name, but I don't know it."

"It's over across the tracks, just beyond."

"Why, Peggy Raymond, I didn't suppose anybody lived over there."

"Lots of people do. Scads of 'em."

"I didn't mean that, Peggy. Of course, I meant the kind of people one goes to see.

"I never went to see these people before," Peggy admitted. "But I've wanted to ever since the night of the Bazar. That boy, you know--"

"O, the ice cream boy! Was he a Dunn?"

"Jimmy Dunn. I saw him on the street the other day, and asked him where he lived. He's an awful little rag-bag, and Graham Wylie calls him all sorts of names, but there's something about him I can't help liking. And I thought I'd see what sort of woman his mother was. Sometimes we have an extra woman in to scrub, at house-cleaning time, though I must say," Peggy concluded thoughtfully, "that judging from Jimmy, she wouldn't be much of a success as a scrubber."

"I'll go with you," Priscilla said, taking Peggy's arm. "It isn't a suitable neighborhood for you to go alone." Now that she had learned that Peggy was not planning to call upon Elaine, Priscilla's mood had become extremely affectionate. She pressed the arm she held. She complimented the way Peggy was doing her hair. While she did not acknowledge to herself that her impulse to be agreeable had its root in the knowledge that she had just been very disagreeable, Peggy recognized her friend's unusual demonstrativeness as an effort at atonement, and she met her half way.

An idealist of the most pronounced type must have christened Glen Echo Avenue. The objects on the landscape most closely resembling glens, were the grimy coal-sheds along the track, while it would have been hard for a professional riddle-guesser to say why the little twisting, squalid street should have been dignified with the name of avenue. A goat, with oblique, uncanny eyes, occupied apparently in the mastication of a paper bag, gazed at the girls as they passed, and swarms of dirty children paused in their play to take stock of the strangers.

"Does Mrs. Dunn live anywhere around here?" Peggy inquired, addressing

a curly-haired little girl with enormous black eyes, and gold rings in her ears. Another girl, with fiery red hair, pushed forward.

"Mary can't understand English,": she explained importantly. "She's a dago and her folks ain't been here long. Who are you looking for?"

"I want to find Mrs. Dunn, Jimmy Dunn's mother."

A babel of shrill voices at once gave directions, which the pointing forefingers rendered unnecessary. As Peggy descended the steps which led to the Dunn's front door, placed, for some inexplicable reason, some feet below the street level, she reflected that in Glen Echo Avenue the name of Jimmy Dunn had proved effective. She was about to knock, when the red-haired girl pushed by and opened the door.

"Mis' Dunn," she screamed. "O, Mis' Dunn, you got company. Come right along," she added, looking over her shoulder. The girls followed as she led the way, uncomfortably aware that all the children from the street were crowding in after them, apparently resolved to lose no detail of the interview.

Mrs. Dunn was seated by the kitchen stove, with a baby in her arms. She was a flabby woman, with a double chin, which seemed superfluous, considering that poor Jimmy had scarcely flesh enough to cover one chin respectably. She eyed her callers with an air more hostile than hospitable.

"If you're lookin' for somebody to wash," she said abruptly, "'tain't no use comin' here. My health don't allow of more than rubbin' out a few pieces for the children."

Peggy explained that their call was purely social, and Mrs. Dunn's manner lost its cold aloofness.

"Isabel," she exclaimed, addressing a freckled child whom Peggy knew at a glance must be one of Jimmy's sisters, "clean off some chairs for the young ladies. Set the potatoes behind the stove. The kindlings might as well go under the bed. 'Liza," she added to the red-haired girl, who, with her usual officiousness, was lending a hand, "now there's a tea-towel hanging up over the sink; take that, some o' you, and dust the chairs off good. No, don't bother about the rungs, Estelle. They ain't going to set on the rungs, be they? Some o' you don't use the sense you was born with."

And so amid a confusion in which Mrs. Dunn sat calm and unperturbed, giving her orders, two chairs were cleared and the girls seated themselves. Peggy, who had discovered that a baby is always a safe entering wedge as a topic of conversation, ventured to pat the round cheek of the child in Mrs. Dunn's arms. "That's a nice fat baby, Mrs. Dunn," she said, and the compliment was not a careless bid for the mother's favor. To Peggy all babies were nice, though some were nicer. This baby was too dirty to admit of the comparative degree, though he was surprisingly plump considering his surroundings.

Mrs. Dunn groaned.

"He may look fat enough, but I've been up with him night and day all winter," she said. "Amonia of the lungs 'twas, and the mumps first of November. So much nursin' is bad for me on account of my heart."

"Do you have heart trouble?" asked Peggy, alarmed.

"Yes, Miss. But that's not the worst. I've got a disease that will take me off some day, I s'pose." She lowered her voice thrillingly. "Lots of folks die of it. You'll see by the papers. It's complication."

"Complication!" Peggy and Priscilla exchanged glances.

"Complication," repeated Mrs. Dunn, as if determined to make no concessions. "I guess it's pretty near the most fatal of any. You can buy things at any drug store to cure consumption and amonia of the lungs, but there ain't a cure for complication. I ast the druggist myself and he said he didn't know of none."

Peggy attempted to change the subject to something less depressing. "I don't suppose Jimmy is home?"

"No, Miss. He's off sellin' papers."

"He's left school, has he? It's a pity, for he seems so bright."

"Jimmy's been through the fourth grade," said Mrs. Dunn. "He can read well enough for anybody. And Francesca, she pretty near finished the fourth grade, too, and she's in the factory now. In the spring they're going to give her a machine."

"Isn't she pretty young? I thought they weren't allowed to work in the factory till--"

"Francesca got a permit," explained Mrs. Dunn, "'count of her pa being out of a job."

"Do you mean that Mr. Dunn hasn't any work at all?" exclaimed Peggy. "Do you have to live on what those two children earn?" Mrs. Dunn plainly expanded under the sympathetic interest.

"This is gettin' to be such a country that a man can't earn an honest living," she said. "Mr. Dunn's an awful smart man. He can turn his hand to most anything, but these Eytalians and other furren folks is comin', and takin' away all the jobs. The doctor told me last week that I'd ought to get some medicine to make my complication a little easier, but I haven't had a cent to spare for it. Seems as if it took all Jimmy and Francesca make to keep us in coal, and pay the rent." She looked thoughtfully in the direction of Peggy's pocket-book, which had a somewhat plump appearance owing to Peggy's habit of cutting recipes and poems out of the newspaper and tucking them away in her pocketbook to show the other girls.

What embarrassing turn the conversation might have taken next it is impossible to say for it was interrupted suddenly by the entrance of a young woman. She was a trim and business-like young woman who betrayed no surprise at the

social aspect of Mrs. Dunn's kitchen, and who declined Peggy's offer of a chair, with a pleasant little smile.

"Can't stay long enough to sit down," she said briskly. "I've been down to the works, Mrs. Dunn, and I find that Mr. Dunn hasn't been there since a week ago Monday."

Mrs. Dunn turned so darkly red that Peggy wondered if the mysterious and dread disease "complication" could by any chance be allied to apoplexy.

"The work down there's too hard for him," she said sharply. "He ain't as strong as he looks, Mr. Dunn ain't. And the foreman's always picking on him."

The young woman shook her business-like head. "Come, Mrs. Dunn," she said, "the worst of Mr. Dunn's troubles is laziness, and the reason he had difficulty with the foreman was that he wouldn't attend to business. Now we are ready to help you, if you show a disposition to help yourselves, but there will be no more relief till Mr. Dunn goes back to work."

Peggy and Priscilla were feeling out of place. They rose murmuring something which might have been an apology for their abrupt departure, or a promise to come again. Mrs. Dunn paid little attention to their going, and it was the red-haired girl who ushered them to the door.

"That's the charity lady," she explained, with evident satisfaction in her superior knowledge. "She's all the time comin' to the Dunns. She don't never come to our home, 'less somebody's sick or dies, or something like that. My pa he sticks to his job, and Mr. Dunn don't, that's why."

"I wonder what that is," Peggy cried, losing interest in the red-haired girl's explanation, as she caught sight of something resembling a football scrimmage at the entrance to Glen Echo Avenue.

"Guess the boys are havin' a little fight about something," said the red-haired girl carelessly, and indeed none of the residents of the avenue seemed to take more than a superficial interest in the cluster of struggling bodies, from which proceeded outcries of the most blood-curdling nature. Only the goat which the girls had previously noticed, seemed to share their apprehensions, for it cantered past, a desperate expression in its oblique, wicked eyes, indicating a determination to put as much distance as possible between itself and the scene of the disturbance.

The group broke up as Peggy and Priscilla drew near, and proved to be composed of a score or so of boys, ranging in ages from six to fifteen. Some were grinning and some looked angry. And one was crying. The last was the central figure of the group, and he limped as he approached the sidewalk. His nose was bleeding so profusely as to make his appearance distinctly ghastly, and Peggy fumbled for her handkerchief. Then she uttered an exclamation.

"It's Jimmy! Priscilla, it is Jimmy Dunn!"

Jimmy's tears dissolved in a smile startlingly friendly. "I got it," he exclaimed

and held forth a wet, dirty and uninviting object, whose proximity caused Priscilla to take a hasty backward step. "What is it?" she exclaimed in horror.

"It's a kitten, I think," Peggy replied doubtfully. "Yes, it is a kitten." Her uncertainty was less singular because the appearance of the poor bedraggled creature was so little suggestive of the kittens Peggy had known. Jimmy Dunn, however, regarded his prize with unalloyed satisfaction. "They was going to drown it, them smart kids," he said with a gesture that included all his late antagonists. "But they didn't. I got it. And that ain't all, you bet." Jimmy's voice took on a portentous hoarseness. "I can't lick 'em all to onct, but every kid in that bunch is going to get *his*, and don't you forgit it."

"I'm afraid you're hurt yourself, Jimmy," Peggy said, proffering her handkerchief. Jimmy shook his head and fell back on his sleeve.

"But you were crying," Priscilla suggested with less than Peggy's tact.

Jimmy Dunn looked a little sheepish.

"I mostly bawl when I get mad," he replied. "Seems as if I couldn't put up a good fight till I start cryin'. I'm going to the store and get a cent's worth o' milk for this kitten. Time it's dry and cleaned up, and had some milk to drink, you wouldn't know it."

Peggy thought it was very likely. It was impossible to imagine how any kitten dry, warm and fed, could bear even the faintest resemblance to the wet, muddy lump of fur in Jimmy's arms. Thinking it advisable that measures of resuscitation should begin as promptly as possible, the two girls said good-bye and walked on, hearing till they left Glen Echo Avenue far behind the shrill tones of Jimmy Dunn's voice as he called to his late opponents promises of retribution in the near future.

"Mrs. Dunn is a little disappointing," Peggy observed at last. "She doesn't seem quite--sincere." That was as severe as Peggy could very well be on short acquaintance. "But as for Jimmy," she went on with sudden enthusiasm, "that boy's got lots of good in him."

And in both particulars Priscilla agreed with her.

CHAPTER IX

PEGGY ACTS AS CRITIC

Peggy's thoughts, busy with plans for the relief of the Dunn family, were turned

abruptly into another channel at the supper-table. "O, by the way, Peggy," her mother said, "you had a caller this afternoon, Mrs. Summerfield Ely."

"She came in a naughty-mobeel," exclaimed Dorothy, almost choking over the long word in her eagerness to get it out before anybody else had a chance.

"My! Doesn't she think she's swell," scoffed Dick. "Fur coat and a dress that trails." Of all manifestations of feminine vanity a trained gown called forth from Dick the most outspoken expressions of contempt.

"It seems," explained Mrs. Raymond, ignoring her son's outburst, "that she was at your Bazar, and bought a collar, Irish lace, I believe."

"O, yes, mother. That was Elaine's collar. I was a little worried for fear nobody would buy it, but not because it wasn't nice enough. I was afraid it was *too* nice. Lots of people come to our Bazar with just about fifty cents to spend, and I was sure the price of the collar would look dreadfully big to nearly everybody. But we really couldn't mark it less than it was worth."

"Certainly not," agreed Mrs. Raymond.

"And then Mrs. Summerfield Ely came in, and I was sure the collar was as good as sold, for it was really the nicest thing there, mother. Just as soon as I could get the chance I called her attention to it, and she looked at it a minute through her lorgnette--"

"O, say," sneered Dick, "why doesn't she wear spectacles if she needs 'em?"

"And she said right off, 'I'll take that,'" continued Peggy tranquilly; "I was so glad, especially on Elaine's account. It makes you feel horrid to put lots of work into a thing and have it left over."

Having relieved her mind, Peggy was now ready to listen to other people. "What did Mrs. Ely want of me, mother?"

"She wants to order a pair of cuffs to match the collar. She wasn't sure who did the work, but she thought you could tell her. I am very glad," added Mrs. Raymond, "for, of course, she will pay a good price, and, from what you tell me, I fancy that Elaine needs the money. Why, what are you going to do, Peggy?"

The impulsive Peggy, starting up from her unfinished supper, flushed guiltily and sat down again. "I was going to run over and tell Elaine," she confessed. "But I suppose the news will keep."

As it turned out, it was not till the next afternoon that Peggy found an opportunity to convey to her next-door neighbor the important information of Mrs. Summerfield Ely's order. Callers came before supper was over, and by the time they left the lights in the next house were extinguished. When Peggy presented herself at Elaine's door at the close of school the following day, she was as relieved at the prospect of delivering her news as if it had been a heavy weight which she had been carrying about for nearly twenty-four hours.

Told in Peggy's glowing language the rather commonplace announcement

took on life and color. Even the multiplication table, repeated with such animation, and such assurance of the complete sympathy of one's listeners, would have seemed touching and impressive. But when Peggy had finished, she was aware of a sudden drop in the temperature. Without meaning to do it she intercepted glances passing between Elaine and her mother, which impressed her as the very reverse of enthusiastic.

"It's very kind of you, Peggy," Elaine said at length, her manner distinctly apologetic. "Awfully kind to be so interested. But you see--" She hesitated, and again the thermometer seemed to drop several degrees. "But you see doing work like that for pay is very different from doing it for charity."

"O, very different," said Mrs. Marshall in her deepest voice.

"Of course it's different," admitted Peggy, frankly bewildered. "But it's nice to earn money for yourself, isn't it?"

Again the perplexing exchange of glances gave her a feeling of being a hopeless outsider. "O, the money's all right," Elaine admitted with a hard little laugh. "Nobody could want it much more than I do. But to earn it like a sewing woman--"

"Fortunately," Mrs. Marshall broke in, "there are other avenues. My daughter has hopes of making a comfortable income in a manner less unsuited to her position in life."

"O, indeed." Peggy looked at Elaine, with the respect due to the prospects whose magnificence was suggested by Mrs. Marshall's manner, rather than her words. To her surprise Elaine was blushing, and looking very uncomfortable. "O, please, mamma," she murmured appealingly.

"Elaine's literary gift," continued Mrs. Marshall complacently, "has been most pronounced since her childhood. A former governess, Miss Brown--Elaine always called her Brownie--was most enthusiastic over her early attempts. I think, my dear, that she compared some of your first efforts to the writings of--"

"Sometimes I wonder," broke in Elaine with a noticeable increase of color, "if Brownie didn't say all those flattering things just because she thought we liked to hear them."

"Upon my word, Elaine," exclaimed Mrs. Marshall indignantly. "Such suspicion is very unbecoming, especially in a young girl. And Miss Brown is so sincere, so unaffected, so different from that disagreeable Miss Collier who was always criticizing everything and everybody. Such a relief as it was to get that woman out of the house."

"She didn't think me much of a genius, that's certain." Elaine laughed a little, apparently at some recollection whose humor increased with distance. "But I'm not so sure," she added immediately, "that she didn't mean every word of it."

"Really, Elaine!" Mrs. Marshall's irritation showed itself by a sudden flushing of her sallow cheeks. "You are in a very singular mood to-day. If you are

going to run down poor dear Brownie, and uphold that dreadful Miss Collier, I don't know but my turn will come next." She drew out her handkerchief rather ostentatiously, and then the awkwardness of the moment was relieved by the arrival of the postman.

Elaine, hurrying to the door, returned with full hands and an expression of countenance anything but enthusiastic. "What a lot of mail!" exclaimed Peggy, thankful for so good an opening for changing the subject.

"Yes, there's enough of it, such as it is," Elaine responded discontentedly. She slammed the postman's offering down on the table. "Two bills--no, three, and the others--"

"A young author has much to contend with," said Mrs. Marshall, forgetting her momentary pique in sympathy. "There is a prejudice against the newcomer, but once get a hearing and it is all plain sailing."

Peggy eyed the long envelopes on the table with sudden understanding. They were returned manuscripts. Very business-like they looked with the row of stamps on the right-hand corner, and even sensible Peggy was thrilled for the moment by something vaguely impressive in the thought of writing for publication.

"I'm sure a great many authors had a discouraging experience to begin with," pursued Mrs. Marshall. "Wasn't it Milton who sold 'Paradise Lost' for a mere song, and I'm sure 'David Harum' was refused by any number of publishers." She looked anxiously at Elaine, who, having opened one of the long envelopes after another, was reading over the rejection slips, her forehead creased in an unmistakable frown.

"Let me see," Mrs. Marshall secured a slip, and perused it carefully. "Why, this is rather encouraging. They say that the rejection does not imply any lack of merit."

"But they must say that to everybody," Elaine insisted gloomily. "It's printed."

"Really, Elaine, if you are determined to take a pessimistic view, read one of the stories to Peggy," cried Mrs. Marshall, forgetting formality for once, "and see what she thinks." Peggy echoed the suggestion heartily. She was really very curious about the contents of those long envelopes.

"If I did, it would be to find out what you really did think about them," Elaine replied. "Most people would say nice things, anyway, but I believe you'd be honest, Peggy." She looked at her friend rather appealingly. "I don't want to waste my time on what isn't going to amount to anything."

Peggy felt a marked decline of enthusiasm. "Of course I'm not any critic," she said uncomfortably. "I can tell you what I think, but that won't be worth much."

"It's what I want, anyway." Elaine jerked a bulky manuscript from its sheath and settled herself in a rocking-chair. "The name of this," she announced in a

defiant voice, "is the 'Maid of the Haunted Well.' It's a story for children, you see."

"O, yes." Peggy leaned forward in an attitude of close attention, while Elaine began to read with a rapidity which gave small heed to the marks of punctuation.

"Long ago, on the edge of a vast and mighty forest, lived a young girl, known far and near as the Maid of the Haunted Well. Fair she was, with lustrous, golden hair, that fell in a profusion of silky ringlets. Deep blue were her eyes. Far and wide had the fame of her loveliness spread, and many came to see for themselves if she was as ravishingly beautiful as she was reported to be."

"How wretchedly you are reading, Elaine," remonstrated her mother. "It is impossible to get any idea of the real excellence of the story when you hurry that way." With an evident effort Elaine slackened her speed and continued.

"The Maid of the Haunted Well had hosts of lovers, but to one and all she gave one answer 'Wouldst wed me? Then drink with me one cup of water from the Haunted Well. Whosoever tastes this water shall never--'"

The monotonous voice ceased suddenly, and the sheets comprising the "Maid of the Haunted Well" strewed the carpet like gigantic snow-flakes. "Elaine!" cried Mrs. Marshall.

"I can't go on with it. It chokes me. Peggy, don't you think it's silly?"

Peggy's struggle between her candor and her sympathy resulted in something of compromise. "I didn't know just what you were trying to bring out about the haunted well," she replied. "But it sounded rather ingenious, and interesting. At the same time--"

"Well?" It was Mrs. Marshall who insisted on the conclusion of the sentence. Elaine was staring gloomily at the carpet.

"O, I only wondered if nice breezy stories about jolly boys and girls wouldn't take a little better, but, of course, I don't know anything about it."

"They are not all children's stories," said Mrs. Marshall, as Elaine preserved an uncompromising silence. "Read her the 'Daughter's Defiance,' Elaine."

For a moment Peggy feared Elaine was going to refuse. She looked ruefully at the dejected figure in the rocking-chair, wondering if her frankness was likely to cost her the friendship she had worked so hard to win. But, after a moment, Elaine reached automatically for another envelope, and drew out a second manuscript. "The Daughter's Defiance," she read, "Or, True in Spite of All." Peggy tightened her grip on the arms of her chair, and prepared herself for the worst.

"'Leave me, if you have any mercy, I pray you leave me to myself.' The Countess Rosalie stood trembling, her hands flashing with jewels, clasped in appeal. Beautiful as she always was, she seemed more beautiful than ever, now that grief had left her cheeks white as alabaster."

There was a ring at the doorbell. Peggy hurried to collect the scattered sheets of the "Maid of the Haunted Well," while "The Daughter's Defiance" found

a temporary hiding-place behind one of the couch cushions. Before the scramble was over the bell had rung for the second time, and Elaine, looking self-conscious almost to the point of guilt, went to answer it. Peggy heard a surprised exclamation, then a small voice piping resolutely.

"Want my aunt Peggy."

Even Mrs. Marshall joined in the laughter. "O, Dorothy," cried Peggy as her niece appeared, wearing an expression of triumph. "To think of all that excitement just for you." She put her arms about the little figure fondly. "What do you want, honey?"

"Want to stay with you."

"If you stay, you must be as still as a little mouse. I'm listening to a story."

"I likes stories!" Dorothy climbed upon Peggy's knee and composed herself to listen. But long before the harrowing adventures of the Countess Rosalie had reached their tragic culmination she had grown restless. Slipping from Peggy's arms she started on a tour of investigation of the room and its contents, and, to be quite honest, Peggy half wished she might follow her example.

But the Countess Rosalie was finally at peace, and Elaine turned a flushed face on her unwilling critic. "Tell me just what you think of it," she said.

Peggy drew a long breath. The temptation to be comforting and complimentary was for the instant almost irresistibly strong. She fortified herself for the ordeal by recalling the character of Elaine's appeal. It was not right that the girl should waste her time, if a friendly caution could save her. Nevertheless Peggy heartily wished that the thankless task had fallen to somebody else.

"Of course it's any amount better than anything I could write, Elaine. I think your imagination is really wonderful. But--"

"Go on." This time it was Elaine who did the prompting. Mrs. Marshall only compressed her lips.

"It seemed to me that there were a good many things in your story that girls can't be expected to know much about, love and crime and remorse and all that sort of thing. And all the characters are counts and countesses and--Well, I never saw a countess--"

"And you're wondering if I ever did. Well, no."

"I should think," suggested Peggy, feeling the beads of perspiration start on her forehead, "that it would be better to write about the things you know. That's all."

"But I don't know anything worth writing about," said Elaine sharply. Then in a changed voice, "O, I see! Probably that's just the reason I oughtn't to try it."

"It seems to me," floundered Peggy, wondering how editors ever lived through the ordeal of rejecting manuscripts, "that after you've lived longer--"

"I believe," interjected Mrs. Marshall witheringly, "that Bryant wrote

'Thanatopsis' at eighteen."

"I believe he did," Peggy acknowledged meekly.

"But this isn't 'Thanatopsis,'" said Elaine, surveying "The Daughter's Defiance," with critical eye, "and I'm not Bryant. That's all Peggy means." She smiled with a courage that did not conceal a quiver of pain, and Peggy looked at her with a contrition no less keen because she herself felt the need of sympathy.

Again a welcome diversion came from Dorothy. In her search for entertainment she had discovered a basket of photographs, placed upon a small stand. Engrossed in the possibilities of her discovery Dorothy had leaned against the basket's frail support, with the result that the stand was overturned and the pictures strewn far and wide. For the second time during her call Peggy went down on hands and knees to gather up the scattered photographs, having satisfied herself by the agility with which Dorothy scrambled to her feet that she was uninjured.

"O, Elaine!" It was a relief to start a topic of conversation which bore no relation to literary pursuits. "Here's a picture of you, I never saw before."

Elaine glanced up quickly. "O," she exclaimed, "I didn't know that was downstairs."

Peggy's discovery was a kodak picture, apparently a group of picnickers, gathered on the edge of a small lake. When she had removed all traces of the disorder caused by Dorothy's mishap she carried the picture to the window, for a closer look.

"How heavy your hair used to be, Elaine. You've got plenty now, but it was lots heavier then."

No reply.

"I love kodak pictures," Peggy went on. "This is an awfully cute one, but really you look older in it than you look now. I suppose it is because there's no retouching."

Something in the other's silence caused her to look up. Elaine's face was crimson, and her manner so indicative of perturbation that Peggy was on the point of demanding the reason.

Elaine saved her from that blunder. "It's not a bit good picture," she said hastily. "I can't bear it. I never mean to leave it where people can see it." She took the offending photograph from Peggy's hand, and had locked it into the drawer of the desk before Peggy had recovered from her amazement.

On the whole, the afternoon had not been very successful. Peggy suggested to Dorothy that it was time to go home, and Dorothy pranced with uncomplimentary readiness to take her departure. Elaine followed them out into the hall, half closing the door behind them.

"Peggy," she said with an unmistakable effort, "if it isn't too much trouble, I wish you'd tell Mrs. Ely that I'll do those cuffs for her."

Peggy turned with a joyful exclamation, and caught Elaine in her arms. "You dear thing. I think that's just splendid of you." Then, without giving her courage time to cool, she rushed on, "And, O, Elaine, you don't know how I hated to say what I did. You'll forgive me, won't you?"

"I shouldn't have forgiven you, if you'd said what you didn't believe," Elaine returned, her lips trembling. "I didn't want sugar-plums, Peggy. I wanted the truth. I've got to do something to earn money, and if I haven't any chance one way, I've got to try another. And, besides," she added, voicing a truth which many people apparently lose sight of, "it's a lot easier always to say something pleasant than to say what's true."

Peggy went home in a glow. She was proud of the stand Elaine had taken, and grateful to her for realizing that friendly sincerity may be a costly gift. "And she's such a sensitive girl, too," Peggy thought. "She was really annoyed because I didn't quite like the kodak picture of her."

The recollection of Elaine's face came before her as the thought took shape, and she seemed to see in its expression something more than annoyance. Why should Elaine have cared? Unconsciously Peggy laid the matter of the photograph away in some secret drawer of her memory, along with several other little perplexities, to await a future solution.

CHAPTER X

RUTH IS PERPLEXED

Peggy was in her room, combing her hair, when Ruth came in. At the sound of her voice in the hall, Peggy pushed the door ajar, and hailed her cheerily.

"Hello, there! Come on upstairs. I'm trying to do my hair Anna's way, and I'm having such a time."

She had turned back to the mirror, and was struggling with the rebellious locks when Ruth burst into the room, somewhat out of breath after her hasty ascent of the stairs. "O, Peggy!" she panted. "The awfullest thing!"

"What's happened?" Peggy demanded briskly. She knew Ruth well enough to be aware that the "awfullest thing" might mean that her father was bankrupt or that she had mislaid her thimble. People who habitually indulge in superlatives must not complain over belated sympathy.

"Just read this." Ruth checked herself suddenly. "It's something," she said in

an altered voice "that it would be better for small persons not to overhear."

Peggy turned hastily. Dorothy stood in the doorway, her resentful gaze fastened upon Ruth. Dorothy was extremely sensitive regarding any reference to her tender years, and seldom failed to grasp the import of a carefully veiled allusion to her presence, even though the words used were beyond her understanding.

"There aren't any small persons over here," she announced, scowling darkly in Ruth's direction. "There's nobody here but free big girls."

Peggy discreetly dropped her hair over her face to veil a smile.

"I wonder what Taffy's doing," she said diplomatically. "I hope he isn't out on the front lawn where he'll get into a quarrel with the butcher's dog."

Dorothy looked stubbornly at the toes of her small shoes, and Peggy tried another tack.

"Let's see! I wonder if I left any caramels on the plate in the pantry last night. Yes, I believe there were two or three."

"Maybe Dick ate 'em," suggested Dorothy, falling into the snare.

"He hadn't eaten them fifteen minutes ago when I came upstairs. On the plate with the blue castle, Dorothy, dear, and Sally'll hand it down to you if you can't reach it." Peggy laughed out, as Dorothy clattered down the stairs. "Isn't she quick?" she exclaimed admiringly. "That child knew in a second you wanted to get rid of her." She shook her hair back as she spoke, and, for the first time, caught sight of Ruth's face.

"Why, Ruth!" Peggy took an impulsive step forward. "Then it's really--"

"It's something really dreadful," Ruth returned, biting the lip which would tremble, in spite of her efforts. She turned the key in the lock to secure the conference against further interruptions, and held a letter toward Peggy. "Read that," she said.

The sheet Peggy drew from the square envelope bore a showy monogram at the top. "My dear boy," Peggy read, and then looked up bewildered. "Why, I don't see--"

"O, go on," Ruth cried, with, an impatient stamp of her foot. "*Do* go on." And Peggy obediently read the communication aloud.

"MY DEAR BOY:--The charming little pendant came last evening, and I thank you a thousand times. The design is as unique and charming as that of the brooch you sent last week. I noticed that you purchased both at King and Kennedy's, who are noted, I understand, for exclusive designs, as well as for the superior quality of their goods.

"By the way, I noticed a darling little ring, a combination of pearls and sapphires, in their window the other day. Ask to see it sometime when you are

passing. They are most obliging and always ready to show their stock whether you wish to purchase or not.

"Again, with many thanks "Yours, "Maud."

Peggy's blank stare met her friend's disturbed gaze. "I don't understand it," she cried. "Who wrote it, and whom is it written to, and why did you bring it to me, and what makes you act as if it was so dreadful?"

"Because it *is* dreadful." Ruth's voice was unnaturally hard. "I don't know who wrote it, except that her name is Maud, but the letter is written to Graham."

Peggy glanced quickly at the envelope in her hand, and then let it fall to the floor, as if it had scorched her fingers. "O, Ruth," she exclaimed reproachfully, "why did you tell me to read it?"

"Peggy, hush! This isn't a time for quibbling. You've got to help me and tell me what to do." The tears of utter misery began suddenly to course down Ruth's cheeks, and Peggy hastily assumed the role of comforter.

"O, Ruth! You mustn't feel that way about it. Of course you and Graham have always been great chums, but you must have known that some day there'd be somebody he'd care for more than for you."

"Peggy Raymond, I never thought you could be so stupid." Ruth's voice told of exasperation. "Listen! This letter is written by a girl named Maud, and Graham never mentioned such a person to any of us. He has lots of girl friends, like all college boys, and their pictures are all around his room, and I know the names of every single one. But he never has said a word about Maud."

Peggy shook her head helplessly, unable to suggest any satisfactory explanation for Graham's singular omission. Ruth continued, gradually losing her self-control, as she summed up the evidence against the brother she adored.

"That would be queer, Peggy, and it would make me feel dreadfully hurt, but, of course, Graham isn't obliged to tell me about his friends unless he chooses to. That isn't the worst part. You see he's giving her presents, things that cost a lot. It was a pendant this week, and a brooch last, and now she's hinting for a ring."

"Yes, he must think a great deal of her," Peggy acknowledged gravely.

"But Graham hasn't any money of his own. Father's doing it all, and the worst of it is, that Graham's expenses are so heavy this year that father is having a real hard time. He spoke to Graham about it not a week ago, and asked him to be as careful as he could, and Graham talked so beautifully about it, and he wanted to give up lots of things, and father said no, and that he'd get hold of the money somehow. And after all that, Graham has bought jewelry for this Maud."

Peggy made no effort to check her friend's wild outburst of weeping. Under the circumstances it would do Ruth good to cry. She looked with a sense of shrinking disgust at the letter on the floor, as if it had been some sort of loathsome creature. "How could he?" she said to herself, as Graham's frank, handsome face flashed out on the screen of her memory. Only that morning she had seen Graham and his father pass. The older man was listening to something the younger was saying, smiling a little, and the look he bent upon his son was full of trust and confidence. And all the time Graham had been deceiving him, taking the money which meant sacrifices in the home, to buy costly presents for a girl whose name he had never mentioned to his sister. It was no wonder that Ruth cried. Sunny Peggy felt sick and disillusioned.

The door-knob rattled. "It's me!" said a voice, which sounded very much as if the three caramels were simultaneously occupying one small mouth.

"Run along, Dorothy!" Peggy was too absorbed in the problem confronting her to make her request tactful. She went over to Ruth, who was making a brave struggle to regain her self-control, and possessing herself of the limp hand, stroked it tenderly. Then Peggy's instinct to make excuses for everybody, led her to say, "After all, perhaps we're making a mountain out of a mole-hill."

"Mole-hill!" exclaimed Ruth indignantly. "How you can call it a mole-hill for Graham to take his father's money and pretend it's for things at college when all the time--"

"O, yes, I know. But there's a chance of a mistake," Peggy protested, "I don't suppose you've talked with Graham about it?"

"Goodness, no! I went up to his room this morning to do the work and this letter lay on the floor, not even in the envelope."

"That doesn't look as if he were ashamed of it," Peggy exclaimed triumphantly.

"O, that's Graham all over. No matter what he did, he'd be too careless to cover his tracks. I picked it up and looked at it to see if it was meant to be thrown away or not, and then my eye caught that about the pendant, and I simply couldn't stop. And after I saw what it meant it seemed to me that I should die if I didn't tell somebody."

"But, Ruth," Peggy protested, alarmed, "you surely are going to talk to Graham about it. You can't mean to let it go on, and not give him a chance to explain or anything."

Poor Ruth hid her face in her hands.

"O, Peggy!" she cried in a stifled voice, "if I thought he could explain, I'd be only too glad to give him the chance. But you know yourself he can't. And how can I bear to tell him that I know all about it. If it was anything else, I wouldn't feel so," she added despairingly. "But think, Peggy, of telling your brother that

you know he has been cheating your father, and being mean and underhanded, all the time that he talked so beautifully about how grateful he was for what had been done for him, and how hard he was going to try to make us all proud of him."

It was a black picture. "Then, I suppose," said Peggy, after a long pause, "that you'll tell your father."

"Father!" Ruth spoke the word with a little protesting cry. "Why, it would kill father to know such a thing about Graham. He never could bear it."

Peggy hesitated. Strong as her sympathy was for Ruth, her sturdy common sense refused to take her friend's view of the case.

"Ruth, this is too serious a thing for two girls like us to keep to ourselves. Somebody's got to know, somebody who'll understand what to do."

Ruth sprang to her feet. "You don't mean that you'll tell. Peggy, you couldn't be so--so dishonorable as to tell. I came to you because I had to confide in somebody. And, now, if I can't trust you--"

"O, good gracious!" exclaimed Peggy with an irritation of which she was immediately ashamed. "Of course I'm not going to tell. But *you* are. Ruth, you must."

Again and again they went over the ground, Peggy coaxing, persuading, trying vainly to bring her friend's resolution to the sticking point, while Ruth squirmed and evaded and protested, and even accused Peggy of heartlessness.

"I tell you it would kill father. He's wrapped up in Graham. If he found out that he had tricked and cheated him he'd never have another happy minute."

"Your mother, then."

"Mother! Why, that would be worse, if anything could be worse. Her heart isn't strong, you know. The doctor says we must be careful about shocks--"

"Then, Ruth Wylie, there's no two ways about it. You've got to pluck up your courage and have it out with Graham."

It was in the discussion of this point that Peggy was accused of heartlessness, a most unjust charge, for at the moment her heart was aching for poor Ruth in her misery.

"You don't understand!" Ruth insisted. "You *can't* understand. Your brother is younger than you are, but if he were older, and you'd always looked up to him, and thought he was perfectly splendid, and felt sorry for other girls with ordinary brothers, just think what it would be like to face him and tell him that you'd found him out, and that he was mean and contemptible. O, it don't seem as if I could be talking about Graham. O, Peggy, why did I ever read that letter?"

Peggy temporarily gave up the effort to bring Ruth to a realizing sense of her responsibility in the matter, and set herself to soothe her. Between indignation on her father's account, and grief over the discovery of the glaring weakness in the brother, whom she had been accustomed to set on a pedestal, poor Ruth's nerves

were sadly unstrung. Peggy coaxed her to lie down upon the bed, and stroked her burning forehead with sympathetic fingers, cooing over her like a dove over its nestlings. All that was sweet and womanly in Peggy responded to the challenge of suffering, and her fingers had the deft tenderness which characterizes the born nurse, and is not always secured by a course of training in the hospitals.

She was just congratulating herself that Ruth's tense muscles were relaxing somewhat, and that her breathing was less hurried and irregular, when a crash in the hall, followed by staccato screams, sent her flying to the door. Most unexpectedly she found her exit barred by a solid oak table and, when she pushed that impatiently aside, she stumbled over the upturned rockers of Dorothy's little red chair. Dorothy herself was somewhere on the stairs, screaming lustily, while Mrs. Raymond and Sally were bending over her, imploring her to tell them where she was hurt.

"What is it? What has happened?" shrieked Peggy, plunging down the stairs, forgetful of everything except the possibility that Dorothy was seriously injured.

No one had time to explain, but gradually from scraps of information let fall, aided by her own intuition, Peggy reached an understanding of the catastrophe. Dorothy, aggrieved by the turning of the key in the lock, had pushed a table in front of Peggy's door, and placed her own small rocking-chair on top, intending from this vantage ground to make a dramatic entrance through the transom. The rocking-chair had frustrated this maneuvre by swaying at the wrong moment, and Dorothy had plunged over the banisters while the chair had toppled to the floor with a crash worthy a more imposing piece of furniture.

"Can you move your arms and legs, dear? Let Grandma see you kick?" pleaded Mrs. Raymond, running her fingers anxiously over Dorothy's plump little body in search of broken bones.

"It's her insides that are hurt, most like. My ma had a cousin who got his insides hurt in a fall, and for seventeen years he never left his bed." Sally, who had a taste for the ghastly, contributed this information, and would have gone on to give the harrowing details had she not perceived that no one was paying any attention to her.

Dorothy's screams were gradually subsiding into gasping sobs. She turned her pathetic, tear-stained little face toward Peggy, who crouched on the stairs beside her, a conscience-stricken heap, repeating miserably, "O, Dorothy, where does it hurt, darling?"

"I--I swallowed 'em," Dorothy volunteered at last, and burst into fresh lamentations.

"Swallowed what, dear?"

"The car'mels. I swallowed 'em quick. I didn't have time to eat 'em."

Peggy and her mother exchanged wide-eyed glances.

"Don't mind about that, dear," coaxed Peggy. "By and by, when you feel better, I'll make you some more candy."

Dorothy's sobs ceased with an abruptness that was uncanny. "Feel better now," she said.

"But where does it hurt, Dorothy?"

"Don't hurt. But I like butter-scotch better'n car'mels."

"You shall have butter-scotch, you precious. But where--" Peggy's solicitous inquiries were interrupted by Dorothy's clapping her hands and beginning to frisk about in a manner which set at ease conclusively any fear as to broken bones.

"It's struck into her brains most like," said Sally hopefully. "I knowed an idget boy onct. It was a fall striking into his brains that ailed him."

Mrs. Raymond and Peggy were too accustomed to Sally's doleful prophecies to be cast down. They heaved sighs of relief, exchanged smiles, and Peggy flew to her room to get her apron. At the head of the stairs she encountered Ruth, a red-eyed, drooping figure, and Peggy's conscience reproached her that in her own alarm and relief, she had momentarily forgotten her friend's greater cause for anxiety.

"You see," she whispered, pausing for a moment, "Sometimes things turn out better than you think they will. I was almost sure that Dorothy was dreadfully hurt, you know." But Ruth only shook her head and made the answer characteristic of people in trouble, who are all likely to think their own especial load unlike any other burden.

"But this is different."

CHAPTER XI

CHRISTMAS PREPARATIONS

Peggy's door was locked again, but this time it was not Ruth's fault. Peggy would have said, if questioned, that she had "troubles of her own," and the chances are that it would not have occurred to her that there was anything incongruous in the selection of such a phrase to describe her Christmas preparations.

The little bed-room, usually a model of exquisite neatness, in spite of its simplicity, now suggested a compromise between a church fair and a rummage sale. Articles in various stages of completion were draped over the furniture,

or hung on door-knobs. The bed was piled so deep that often when bed-time approached, Peggy was tempted to take to her easy-chair for the night, for what of the night was left, that is to say, for Peggy was infringing sadly on those hours warranted to make one healthy and wealthy and wise, if properly observed. Mrs. Raymond was uneasy when she saw the gleam of light through the transom long after midnight, but Peggy met all remonstrances with the plead, "O, please don't say anything, mother, till Christmas is over. You know I've got to finish."

When Dorothy rattled the door-knob this particular afternoon, Peggy's start was suggestive of over-strained nerves. Her voice was unnaturally sharp as she demanded, "who's there?"

"Me."

"You know you can't come in, Dorothy. Run away and play."

The knob rattled again. It was not an aggressively loud sound, but Peggy was just tired enough to find it unendurable. Her lips tightened.

"Dorothy, will you stop that noise? This minute!"

Surprise kept Dorothy motionless for almost thirty seconds. "What you doing?" she asked, after that amazing pause, her rosy lips close to the key-hole, her voice persuasive.

"I'm making something you can't see. Please don't bother." Peggy jerked her thread savagely. She was, as a matter of fact, hemstitching the little petticoat of the doll she was dressing for Dorothy. She had laughed when her mother suggested that it was hardly worth while to take so much pains. "A strip of embroidery gathered and put in a band would please the child just as well. She isn't old enough to appreciate the work you are putting into these dainty little garments."

"Work! I don't call it work. It's just fun," said Peggy blithely. "And it's such a tiny way round a doll's petticoat, mother, that it won't take any time to speak of." There would have been time enough if there had not been so many things of the same kind; trifles demanding little time when taken separately, but together filling to overflowing Peggy's hours of leisure, and infringing on the time she needed for recreation and sleep. She thought of them with a sense of nervous apprehension which was far removed from anything festive. There were two of the sweet peas on her mother's centrepiece not finished yet, and those sweet peas took so long.

"I must finish Aunt Rachel's bureau scarf to-night," Peggy thought. "I've got to allow for the mails being slow. Perhaps I'd better leave this till that is done, for I can finish the doll the very last thing." She tucked the petticoat out of sight, and produced the bureau scarf from under a rainbow litter of Dresden ribbon, scraps of silk, and odds and ends of lace, all of which Peggy designed for especial use.

"Next year," thought Peggy, frantically attacking the bureau scarf, "I'm going to begin my Christmas presents New Year's afternoon. Perhaps if I start the first of January and keep right at it through the year--Why, what's that?"

There was a sound in the hall, a choked, low, pitiful sound that seemed startlingly out of place with Christmas near. The bureau scarf dropped to the floor. The spool of thread and the thimble made a bee-line to hide themselves under the dresser, as if they both had enough of getting ready for Christmas. Peggy herself lost no time in turning the key and bolting into the hall, where Dorothy a pensive little heap, her face hidden on her knees, was weeping.

Dorothy had a variety of ways of crying. When angry her tears were accompanied by shrill squeals, as pathetic as a fife playing Yankee Doodle. If she hurt herself she was more likely to relieve her feelings by noise than by tears, suggesting those summer showers whose thunder peals and lightning flashes prepare us for a deluge, but which content themselves, after all, with a few scattering drops. These emotional outbreaks on Dorothy's part Peggy took philosophically. But when she cried softly, hiding the face down which the big tears were coursing, while the sobs shook her little body, then indeed, it was another matter.

"Dorothy!" Peggy cried, dropping down on her knees beside the despondent figure. "Dorothy, what is the matter? What are you crying about?"

"Aunt Peggy." It was a full minute before Dorothy could answer, and then the quiver running through the words pierced Peggy's heart. "Ain't Christmas going to be over pretty quick?"

"It comes next week, honey."

"Well, I'll be glad when it's gone." A great sob emphasized the statement. "It's such a horrid time."

"Dorothy!" Peggy was aghast: "You can't mean that you don't like Christmas."

"It's a horrid time," Dorothy repeated, with every indication of sincerity. "Folks lock doors. And then they tell you to go and play, and there ain't anyfing to play. And there's nice fings, but you can't see 'em." She sobbed again as she painted the black picture, and Peggy hastened to explain, "But, darling, you will see them on Christmas day. Think what a good time you will have when you find out all the secrets."

"But I want a good time now," said Dorothy explosively.

For once Peggy had no reply ready. What was there to be said? Of course Dorothy did. Who could reasonably expect this little human thistle-down to fold her hands and wait patiently through weeks of Christmas preparations in which she had no share. Peggy, absorbed in her plans, had found no time for the stories Dorothy loved, for the little after-supper frolics, for candy pulls in the kitchen, for walks over the snow. All these joys had been discontinued with a vague promise of something very nice to happen by and by. What wonder Dorothy was dissatisfied?

"And getting ready for Christmas is almost the nicest part," Peggy thought. "And here I've locked my door and shut her out of it. It's no wonder she thinks

Christmas is horrid." She lowered her voice mysteriously. "Dorothy, how would you like to help me make a Jack Horner pie?"

The hands which covered Dorothy's eyes dropped to her knees. The little face revealed was more suggestive of April than of December, with the wet eyes shining, and the dimples swallowing up stray tear drops. "A Jack Horner pie?" repeated Dorothy in a thrilled whisper.

"Yes."

"Will we put in a fum and pull out a plum?"

"They'll be funny plums. Come and I'll show you. But we'll lock the door, because this is our secret and nobody must know."

Under the bed was a shiny tin milk pan, and rolls of tissue paper, green and red. "Now I'm going to cover this pan with green paper," Peggy explained. "And there'll be a pasteboard cover, with a big round hole in the middle, and there's where we will put in our thumbs."

"And cry what a big boy'm I," added Dorothy, hopping on one foot, which with her was an indication of fascinated interest.

"The cover'll be all fixed with red tissue paper, and, instead of plums, there'll be little presents inside."

"Is it going on the Christmas tree, Aunt Peggy?" Dorothy squatted beside her aunt, carried away by the enchantment of the plan. And as Peggy looked at the beaming little face the isolation of her previous preparations suddenly seemed selfish.

"No, this isn't for the tree. It's going on the table for the Christmas dinner. The presents aren't nice ones, you know. They're funny little jokes. Here's Dick's present, a queer little make-believe alarm-clock, because he is so slow about getting up in the morning.

"Dick's a lazy boy to be my uncle," said Dorothy, giggling rapturously. "I guess he'll be 'shamed when he pulls out his plum."

"There's a rhyme to go with it, Dorothy. That's part of the fun. Do you want to hear it?"

Dorothy promptly became a statuette of attention, her hands folded, and her grave face flatteringly expectant, while Peggy read aloud.

"Dick, Dick, the sleepy-head,
Dearly loves his little bed.
    Here's a cure; 'twill work for sure,
    Wind it tight. Set it right,
And then go ahead and
    Blow out the light.
When morning comes, how the folks will stare,

To go to breakfast and find Dick there."

"That's poetry," said Dorothy much impressed. "I learned poetry once, all about Tit, Tiny and Tittens. Did you write a poetry plum for me, too, Aunt Peggy?"

"Yes, but I mustn't read you yours. That's a surprise, but you can hear grandpa's. You see, I'm going to give him a pen because he hates to have anybody else use his pens, and Dick's always doing it." Peggy cleared her throat. "This is grandpa's poem.

"Now, here's a pen for the best of men,
And I wish it were purest gold.
It could not write, in a whole long night,
Half the love my heart does hold.
Not for Dick's abuse, but for father's use,
Is the pen I here present.
May it long keep bright and continue to write,
As well as the maker meant."

"I'm going to write some poetry, too, for my Christmas presents," said Dorothy, fired to emulation. "I'm going to say,

"This is for Aunt Peggy
Because she's eggy."

"But I wouldn't be *eggy*, I hope," exclaimed Peggy, laughing with an abandon rare in the last ten days. "So your poetry wouldn't fit."

Dorothy's face fell. "Oh!" she exclaimed, with perhaps a glimmering appreciation of the truth that art is long. "Oh! I didn't know that poetry had to be true." She gave up her ambition for the time being. "What's grandma's poetry, Aunt Peggy?"

Peggy unfolded the slip of paper willingly. She was proud of that attempt.

"We could have a jolly Christmas though old Santa Claus should go.
We could do without a turkey at a pinch.
And to spare the cheerful holly and the festive mistletoe
Would be rather in the nature of a cinch.
There is only one thing needed, as you'll readily agree,

One essential that surpasses every other,
For of all absurd endeavors, the most imbecile would be,
Just to try to have Christmas without mother."

"I'm going to have a Christmas 'thout my mover," Dorothy remarked unexpectedly, and Peggy read on rapidly to avoid arguing the point.

"Though the chimney corner stockings should be limp on Christmas day,
Though the postman on his rounds should fail to ring.
Though of all our friends and neighbors there was not a one to say,
'Merry Christmas,' or some other proper thing.
Still I think we could be happy, meet the day with faces bright,
Drawing just a little closer to each other.
But there isn't one among us who could keep his spirits light,
If we had to spend a Christmas without mother.

Dorothy had heard poetry enough by now. She moved about the room, keeping her plump hands tightly folded, in her effort to comply with Peggy's caution not to touch. And Peggy, working busily at the construction of the Jack Horner pie, found Dorothy's presence no drawback to her progress. As a matter of fact there is such a thing as hurrying till one is unable to accomplish anything. The distraction of Peggy's thoughts by the artless questions and the refreshingly original observations of her small niece was helpful rather than hindering. Her tense nerves relaxed. She laughed out half a dozen times, as if Christmas preparations were a joyful matter instead of soul-straining, nerve-racking ordeal, through which one must pass in order to be worthy of the pleasures beyond.

The Jack Horner pie was finished and tucked out of sight when someone ran up the stairs. "Peggy!" said a breathless voice, outside the door. "Peggy!"

"O Ruth!" Peggy sprang up with hospitable intent, but Dorothy frowned. "We're pretty busy," she said warningly, and in tones distinctly audible in the hall.

Peggy threw the door ajar, disclosing her friend's flushed face and heaving chest. "You should put on a coat, instead of running to keep warm," scolded Peggy.

"I'm warm enough." Ruth made an impatient gesture. "Peggy, there's another."

"What, you don't mean--"

"Sh!" Ruth drew Peggy out into the hall. "Yes," she replied, nodding mysteriously. "It's another letter from Maud."

Peggy regarded the square envelope her friend held toward her, and frowned as she drew back. "I don't want it. I shouldn't have read the other if I'd understood."

"Peggy, it's the strangest thing I ever heard of. It's just like the first."

"Just like the first? I suppose you mean--"

"I mean it's word for word like the other one. Do you suppose she could have forgotten that she had written him and thanked him over again?"

"If that's the case she must be a very stupid person," Peggy pronounced judicially. Then curiosity prompted her to ask, "Did Graham leave that lying around too?"

Ruth flushed hotly. "No-o! I took the mail from the postman, and I recognized the monogram. The writing didn't look natural. She must have used a different pen."

Peggy refused to be diverted by the peculiarities of Maud's penmanship. "Ruth Wylie!" she demanded indignantly. "Do you mean to tell me that you opened your brother's letter?"

Ruth squirmed. "Peggy, I just had to know what she said."

"If you wanted to know what she said you should have gone to Graham and asked him. I don't think anything very good ever comes from doing things in an underhanded way."

"Don't be cross, Peggy," pleaded Ruth. "I never was so puzzled and troubled in all my life. And I want you to advise me."

"I am advising you. Go to Graham about it. Or else tell your father. That's the only advice I can give you, and the best you're likely to get from anybody."

"I can't do that," Ruth returned despairingly. Resentfully she studied the address on the letter she held. "Christmas is just spoiled for me, Peggy. I can't think of anything but Maud, and the way Graham is wasting his money, and how deceitful he is, and how poor father would feel if he knew." She swallowed down a sob, and almost remorsefully, Peggy threw her arms about her and hugged her.

"You poor dear thing. I only wish I could help you. But, honestly, Ruth, there is only one way out, and that's to be frank and above board. Even if Graham has done wrong, silly things, it's no sign that he can't be brought to reason. I'd talk to him in a minute, if he were my brother."

Unwelcome advice seldom seems good advice to the recipient. Ruth went away dejected, with the purloined letter in her pocket, but Peggy's remonstrances had at least one good effect. Ruth resolved that in the future she would read no more of her brother's letters without his permission. Peggy, standing in the hall, her forehead knotted over her friend's problem, felt a little twinge of shame as she recalled her varying moods of dejection and irritation during the past week. The finishing of a specified number of gifts at a specified time seemed a trifling cause

for disquiet, compared with the burden poor Ruth was carrying.

"Aunt Peggy!" A timid voice spoke from the doorway. "See what I've found."

Peggy whirled about. Dorothy stood on the threshold, the doll's petticoat slipped over her arm. She was studying it speculatively.

"It looks some like a sleeve, Aunt Peggy. A sleeve to a little girl's dress."

Peggy stifled the irritable exclamation which rose to her lips with such unwonted readiness, pulled the petticoat from Dorothy's arm and set it upon her curls. "It looks to me now like a cap," she said cheerily. "A real little dunce cap. Look in the glass and see."

Dorothy gazed at her reflection in the mirror, and agreed rapturously. "It looks 'zactly like a dunce cap, Aunt Peggy, and then I'd be the little dunce, wouldn't I? Or might it be--" she made the suggestion diffidently. "It *might* be a little teenty petticoat, but I guess it isn't 'cause then there'd have to be a dolly to go with it. And, anyway, I'm not going to pry, 'cause Christmas is coming."

Peggy laughed. After all it was better to have Dorothy suspect, than to have her weeping as if her heart were broken and wanting Christmas over. She sat down to her bureau scarf with less of the air of a sweat-shop worker, than had characterized her earlier in the day, and as her needle flew, and she abstractedly answered Dorothy's comments, her thoughts hovered about Ruth, poor Ruth, whose Christmas was spoiled through no fault of her own, whose *joy was poisoned by the bitterest of all disillusions, disappointment in one she had loved and trusted.*

CHAPTER XII

DOROTHY GOES SHOPPING

"Dorothy, if you don't keep still, how am I ever going to get your legging on?"

Peggy's protest paralyzed Dorothy's dancing feet for exactly fifteen seconds by the clock. It was an occasion for dancing and handclapping and little gurgles of laughter. Dorothy was going down town to do her Christmas shopping, and the friskiest of Santa Claus' reindeers could not have outdone her in capers.

"I guess I'll buy grandma some 'fumery," she announced, as her youthful aunt, flushed a becoming pink by the violence of her exertions, struggled with the refractory leggings. "And I'll buy grandpa a naughty-mobeel, and Dick a candy cane." There was no purpose of partiality in Dorothy's apportionment of her gifts. She adored her grandparents equally, and really preferred Dick to any

other member of the family, since he was the only one of the number who could turn somersaults, an accomplishment Dorothy esteemed above all others. But if an automobile was desirable, so was a candy cane. Dorothy had not reached the point of estimating a gift by its money value.

"Your present is all buyed, Aunt Peggy. Grandma did it, but it's a secret. Want me to tell you?"

"O, no!" Peggy left off buttoning Dorothy's coat, and clapped her hands over her ears. "You mustn't tell secrets," she explained hurriedly. "They're to be kept till Christmas."

"But I don't like secrets to keep," protested Dorothy, unconsciously voicing the sentiments, of some older people. "I like 'em to tell: Aunt Peggy your present's white with pink edges, and--"

The entrance of Mrs. Raymond, with six shining new pennies to add to Dorothy's Christmas funds, diverted her thoughts from the dangerous topic. If each of the glittering coppers had been a gold piece they could not have been received with greater rapture. Dorothy galloped about the room, planning Christmas benefactions with the reckless liberality of a millionaire, and Peggy was so encouraged by this rapid development of generosity as to suggest, "And you're going to buy something for the poor children, aren't you, Dorothy, the children who don't have any Christmas?"

Dorothy reflected. Suddenly her little face blossomed into a pensive sweetness beautiful to see.

"I know, Aunt Peggy," she exclaimed, with the triumph of one who has found a happy solution to a puzzling problem. "I know. The poor children can have the outside of my nuts."

"The outside! Why, she means the shells, mother. I don't see how you can laugh." Peggy looked reproachfully at her mother who had suddenly become interested in the view from the window. "Think how terrible it would be if she should grow up selfish."

"She has time to outgrow lots of things, dear, while she's growing up," said Mrs. Raymond comfortingly, and turned to kiss the rosy mouth of her impatient granddaughter. As Peggy and Dorothy went hand in hand down the stairs, a little voice was wafted back to her. "Your present's a secret, grandma. It's going to be 'fum--" And Mrs. Raymond guessed that a resolute hand clapped over Dorothy's too communicative lips, accounted for the sudden breaking off of the sentence.

Dorothy had been so excited over the prospect of spending her twenty-six cents that Peggy deemed it best not to mention the momentous interview which was to preceed the shopping. On the way down town, she broached the subject. "Dorothy, how would you like to see Santa Claus?"

Dorothy immediately stood up on the seat. "Aunt Peggy!" she exclaimed

with trembling earnestness, "Are we going to the North Pole?"

"I'm afraid we're not bundled up enough for such a cold journey," laughed Peggy. "But I guess we'll find Santa on the third floor at Myers and Bates. And, if he's there, you can tell him what you want most for Christmas."

"If I ask him for a dolly-baby's carriage, do you s'pose he'll shake his head?" cried Dorothy, lurching as the car jolted, and precipitating herself into Peggy's arms. "Will he 'member how I slapped Sally, 'cause she wouldn't let me eat out of Taffy's plate?"

"Probably he'll forgive you for that, if you're very, very sorry," returned Peggy, smiling as she thought of the gift stored at Priscilla's, to be safe from Dorothy's prying. "Anyway, it won't do any harm to ask him."

On the third floor of the department store, as Peggy had conjectured, a somewhat bored and stolid looking Santa Claus distributed mechanical pats on the heads of the children gathered about him, and nodded encouragement to their artless confidences. Dorothy gazed with half fearful fascination at his wealth of snowy hair, looking all the whiter in contrast to his florid complexion. Whether or not Santa Claus in the flesh fell short of her expectations, Peggy did not know, but whatever the explanation, she found it necessary almost to drag Dorothy to the august presence.

Her turn came after an interminable waiting. A big hand patted the top of Dorothy's head and a deep voice asked, "An' what are you afther wantin' for Christmas?" Considering a life-long residence at the North Pole, Santa Claus' accent was surprisingly suggestive of Tipperary.

Dorothy did not reply and Peggy nudged her. "Tell him what you want for Christmas, darling."

"A pair of mittens," Dorothy said faintly.

"Mittens!" exclaimed the astonished Peggy. "Why, I thought--" But Santa had nodded, and clapped his hand on the red head of the boy next in line. "And what would this foine lad be wantin' for Christmas?"

The two moved on. Then Dorothy hid her face in Peggy's skirts, smothering a wail.

"I don't like Santa Claus," she sobbed. "And I hate mittens. I'll frow 'em away. I'll let Taffy eat 'em up."

"Then why did you tell him you wanted mittens?" asked Peggy, fighting back her laughter, as she realized the seriousness of the situation, from Dorothy's point of view.

"Cause he didn't look as if he'd give me a doll-carriage. He looked as if I hadn't been a good girl. O, dear! O, dear!"

The situation was becoming embarrassing as Dorothy's sobs grew more and more violent. People turned to stare, and Peggy hastily suggested a remedy.

"I tell you what, Dorothy. We'll go back and tell him it was a mistake, and that what you really wanted was a doll-carriage."

Though this suggestion had the effect of drying Dorothy's tears, it was some time before she could be persuaded to act upon it. When they again presented themselves in the line of supplicants, Dorothy hung back, and Peggy acted as spokesman.

"Santa Claus, this little girl made a mistake when she asked you for mittens. What she really wants is a nice doll-carriage, so she can take her dolly out riding."

Santa Claus looked at Dorothy's pink eyelids, and cheeks still stained with tears, and a sudden attractive change came over him. He looked less like a tired, red-faced man, getting through with the drudgery of his day's work, and more like the jolly saint of the chimney and fireplace. A twinkle appeared in his eye.

"I think mesilf 'tis a sinsible change," said Santa Claus, still with a surprising richness of accent. "An' 'twud be no wonder, my little dear, if you got thim both, and a matter o' small trifles beside." And with the gorgeous indefiniteness of this promise sounding in her ears, it was small wonder that Dorothy went away radiant.

Twenty-six cents is easily spent under certain conditions, and then again, its investment is a matter requiring the most profound deliberation, and accompanied by frequent changes of mind. The amount of time and consideration Dorothy found necessary before reaching a conclusion, passed belief. The good-natured Christmas crowd surged about her as she stood immovable before a counter, gazing dreamily on the articles displayed, and responding to Peggy's hints with a reproving "Sh! I'm thinking." But at last her funds were expended, and presents provided for the entire family. As Dorothy would not listen to the suggestion that anything should be sent, both she and Peggy had their arms full of knobby packages anything but small, for the size of a Christmas gift bears little relation to the cost.

Once outside, Peggy drew a breath of relief. "That's over for a year," she congratulated herself. "Dorothy, dear, let's walk down to the next block. I want to get some Christmas seals."

Dorothy who had borne up surprisingly while her own shopping was in progress, now developed symptoms of weariness. "I'm getting awful tired in the legs, Aunt Peggy."

"We'll go home in a very few minutes, Dorothy. Won't grandma be surprised to see all these lovely packages, and won't she wish she knew what was inside?" Thus skilfully did Peggy divert the thoughts of her small companion, till the tired little feet were trotting jubilantly over the pavements, keeping time to joyful thoughts.

Half way down the block a young man stood before a jeweller's window,

intent on the display. Something in his attitude struck Peggy as familiar. She looked at him very closely, and then her eyes flew to the sign over the door, King and Kennedy.

Peggy came to an abrupt halt. A sudden anger blazed in her eyes. Righteous indignation made her oblivious to everything but its exciting cause. For the young man by the jeweller's window was Graham Wylie, and Peggy could not doubt that he was racking his brains to decide on a suitable Christmas gift for Maud.

It was not Peggy's habit to evade responsibility by the thought that a thing was none of her business. She pushed her way through the crowd, and stood at Graham's elbow. "Good afternoon."

Graham's start was of course due to a guilty conscience, though the face he turned on Peggy was exasperatingly non-committal and cheerful. "Hello, Peggy. Come over to see the sparklers?"

"I don't care much about jewellers' windows," Peggy said with severity. "What's the use of looking at a lot of things you can't afford to buy, and then getting to want them, and making yourself miserable?"

Graham chuckled.

"That may be all right for some folks," he replied. "But your remarks don't apply, of course, to wealthy individuals like myself. I'm thinking of buying up a few of the novelties before I go home, as Christmas remembrances for my friends."

He looked at Peggy smilingly, as if he expected her to appreciate the joke. Meeting the unblinking gravity of her gaze, his face changed slightly.

"I don't believe any real friend of yours would want a very expensive present from you," exclaimed Peggy, too indignant to realize that she was on dangerous ground. "Because, of course, you can't afford it."

A little irritation mingled with Graham's surprise.

"Naturally a fellow just finishing college and dependent on his father for every cent, isn't going to blow in much for jewelry," he replied with an air of wishing to change the subject. "Some of these designs are great, Peggy, even if we can't buy them."

"Are they?" Peggy looked resolutely over the display, as if defying temptation.

"It's an enterprising firm," continued Graham, mystified by her unusual manner. "They're great on advertising. The first ad. I got from them nearly took me off my feet. It was gotten up like a letter."

"What!" Peggy's sudden accession of breathless interest was as incomprehensible as her previous air of disapproval. "A letter? Tell me about it, Graham."

"Why, there isn't much to tell. It reads like a note of thanks for different presents you've sent. It brings in the name of the firm once or twice, and puffs 'em up in an accidental way. The mother of one of the fellows read his, and thought

it was the real thing. He had no end of trouble explaining."

This time Peggy joined in Graham's laughter, and she was thankful that Ruth's unconscious brother did not guess the tension of feeling beneath her merriment. Peggy only wished she had wings to fly to Ruth, and tell her that all was well. She fought against an alarming impulse to cry on the spot, to relieve her own overcharged heart. But as it happened, the fates had provided another outlet. There was no immediate danger of Peggy's losing her head from joy.

"Where's Dorothy?"

She flung the frightened question full in Graham's face. The young fellow stood staring.

"Dorothy? Was she with you?"

"Yes. She was right here. She can't have gotten far away. O, how could I forget her? How could I?"

They pushed through the crowd to the curb, looking wildly in both directions. Standing at Graham's elbow, Peggy babbled on almost incoherently.

"Red coat, Graham, and a red hood. It was only a minute ago. O, why did I do it? Can't you see a little girl all in red? O, what will mother say?"

"Look here, Peggy, you want to keep your head." The sharpness of Graham's tone was like a dash of cold water, disagreeable but effective. "Dorothy won't be hurt because she's out of your sight for a minute. But if you're going to be any help, you must stop this."

Peggy gasped a little, and followed meekly, pale and trembling, but controlling herself by a mighty effort. The policeman at the corner had not seen any little girl in red wandering off by herself, but he took a reassuring view of the situation.

"If you haven't found her in twenty minutes call up the Stark Street station. They're getting 'em there just now at the rate of twenty a day."

Twenty minutes! It was long before Peggy could hear that measure of eternity named, without thinking immediately of a seemingly interminable and altogether miserable stretch of time, in which she seemed to experience enough contrition and agonized foreboding for a half-dozen lives. "Isn't it time to telephone, Graham?" she asked again and again, and each time Graham answered with amazing patience. "Not yet, Peggy. Don't be scared. Everything will be all right."

In twenty minutes they had had time to search both sides of the street through the crowded shopping district, scanning the kalaidoscopic crowd in search of a little girl in a red coat and hood, their faces lighting up at every glimpse of that cheery color, and falling again as a closer look failed to reveal the object of their search.

At length the endless twenty minutes were up, and Graham went to telephone. Peggy waited for him at the corner, and on Graham's return she clapped

her hands over her ears. Later Graham wondered why, but at the time he was only thankful that it was not necessary for him to tell the bad news. Peggy lifted her eyes to his face, and on the instant read the truth.

"She isn't there," she gasped. "O, Graham!"

Ruth's brother took her by the arm. "Brace up, Peggy," he urged kindly. "I guess we didn't give them quite time enough. I'll call 'em up again in another ten minutes. Suppose we--"

He never got any further, for at the moment someone pulled Peggy's sleeve, and Peggy, turning, looked down into a beautiful face. Strictly speaking, it perhaps lacked the elements of which beauty is supposed to consist. Under the carroty hair, innumerable freckles stood out in bold relief against the layers of grime, while the absence of a front tooth sacrificed in a fight, gave a peculiar impressiveness to the smile. But to Peggy the countenance was beyond criticism, for it was the face of Jimmy Dunn and he had Dorothy by the hand.

"She's a great kid, she is," exclaimed Jimmy Dunn with his hoarse chuckle. "There was a Santy Claws with a banner, a-avertisin' a sale o' Christmas trees, down on Block street, and she up and trots after him. I seed her, and I knowed she b'longed to you, so I fetched her along back. Ef I hadn't found you 'round here, I was going to take her home."

"Jimmy, old man," Graham exclaimed, "you're all right." He slapped the boy's shoulder with a good fellowship which meant more to Jimmy Dunn than a dollar bill. Meanwhile Peggy was crying over Dorothy, who in her eagerness to impart a great discovery of her own, was quite indifferent to the emotions of her relative.

"Aunt Peggy," she cried breathlessly, "What do you think? There's two of Santa Claus. Two of him, Aunt Peggy."

Graham took them home, telling Peggy good-naturedly that she wasn't fit to be trusted, and Peggy was too thankful to be taken care of, to resent the implication. The car was crowded, and Peggy was glad of the opportunity this gave her to hold Dorothy on her lap, and indulge in surreptitious hugs. Graham sat across the aisle and laughed at them both with the vast superiority of a collegian.

"He was a nice Santa Claus, Aunt Peggy," was Dorothy's only defence when reproached for her abrupt departure. "I asked him for lots of things, a dolly, and another dolly and a naughty-mobeel and a gold watch and a new house and a picture book. O dear! Aunt Peggy, I wish I'd told him another dolly beside."

Graham left his charges at Peggy's door as the early winter dusk was veiling the sky. He was half across the street when Peggy called after him:

"Graham! O, Graham! Please tell Ruth to come over here as quick as she possibly can."

"All right," Graham responded and smiled to himself. Peggy wanted to tell Ruth all about Dorothy's disappearance, of course, and her rescue, as if it were an

affair of thrilling moment. "Knew she'd turn up, all right," thought Graham, puffing out his chest, and congratulating himself on being superior to the weakness of girls, even the best of them.

He little guessed the real importance of the news Peggy had to tell, or the difference it was to make in his sister's Christmas. When Ruth came back presently, moist around her lashes, and stooped to kiss him, as he sat poring over the evening paper, he was far from suspecting that in that kiss there was penitence, as well as the love of which he was so sure.

Dorothy had been asleep an hour when Mrs. Raymond bethought herself of a question which the exciting character of Peggy's return had temporarily banished from her thoughts. "By the way, Peggy, where are Dorothy's Christmas presents?"

Peggy sat up straight, stared at her mother, and let her work drop to the floor. "Mother Raymond!"

"Well, what is it, child?"

"Mother, they're lost."

"Lost? You don't mean all of them?"

"I'm--I'm afraid so." Peggy looked shamed-facedly at the carpet. "We both had our arms full, and I'm sure neither of us had a bundle coming home in the car. I suppose when I found Dorothy was lost, I let everything drop."

"And when Dorothy saw the Santa Claus she probably did the same," said Mrs. Raymond, laughing a little. "It isn't a great loss as far as their value is concerned, but I'm afraid she will be dreadfully disappointed."

"I can slip down town to-morrow, mother, and get duplicates of everything. But I guess I'll go alone. I don't feel equal to taking Dorothy shopping again till Christmas is over."

Peggy stole into Dorothy's room as she went upstairs to bed, just to make sure she was really there. The little face against the pillow was charmingly angelic. Dorothy asleep showed no traces of the mischief and elfishness which rendered the Dorothy awake a care as well as a delight. As Peggy stood looking down on her, Dorothy moved restlessly, and murmured the wonderful contribution that day had made to her fund of knowledge.

"There's two--of Santa Claus."

CHAPTER XIII

CHRISTMAS CELEBRATIONS

"Hello, Central. That was the wrong number. I want White 6492, please. No, White. Yes, please."

It was the day before Christmas. At the telephone exchanges the girls, half beside themselves between the people inquiring anxiously as to the fate of packages not yet delivered, and others bent on extending the compliments of the season to their friends, were making connections with the haste which results in waste. Peggy, who was trying to telephone Elaine, and had twice received the wrong number, rolled her eyes impatiently in her mother's direction.

"Reminds me of the telephones we used to make out of tin boxes and linen thread. When we couldn't hear over the 'phone we'd run to the window and shout across the street. I could have gone to the Marshalls twice over, while I've been saving time by telephoning. Hello! Is that you, Mrs. Marshall? May I speak to Elaine a minute?"

It was not a very long wait this time. "Hello!" said a languid voice, not a Christmasy voice, by any means.

"Hello, Elaine. Going to be dreadfully busy this afternoon?"

"O, I guess not." Still the voice had a wilted sound. One knew instinctively that the mouth of the speaker drooped at the corners.

"I've got something to take over to the Dunns. I thought perhaps you'd go with me. And maybe you'd like to slip some little thing into the basket, a ribbon for one of the girls, or a package of nuts or something of that sort."

"All right," said Elaine, with a sufficiently long pause before her reply to give the impression that in point of fact it was all wrong. "I don't mind."

"We'll start about half-past three, I think. Then we'll be back before it begins to be dark. Thank you ever so much." Peggy was smiling as she hung up the receiver, and then, catching her mother's eye, her inward satisfaction boiled over in a chuckle.

"A little Christmas missionary work?" asked Mrs. Raymond, smiling too, for Peggy's pleasure in her diplomacy was infectious.

Peggy nodded. "Mother, you don't know how Elaine talks about Christmas. She says she wishes she could sleep right through it, and never wake up till everything was over. You see it is so different from every other Christmas Day she can remember."

"Of course it is, poor child."

"And I think," Peggy continued wisely, "that going to see the Dunns is pretty likely to give one a thankful feeling. If it wasn't anything but getting back where things were clean, it would be quite a merry Christmas all by itself. Besides, the other girls are up to their neck in work, and Elaine isn't going to give any presents to speak of, so she can spare the time better than anybody else."

When Elaine slipped through the opening in snow-covered hedge that af-

ternoon, her appearance carried out the impression her voice had given in the brief conversation over the 'phone. She moved slowly, heavily, as if some unseen burden, resting on her young shoulders, claimed all her strength. Her face had the blankness of one whose thoughts are far away from her surroundings. When Peggy flung open the door to welcome her, the contrast between the two was almost painful, the one girl glowing, bubbling over with cheery vitality, the other wearily indifferent.

The sight of the big basket waiting in the hall was successful in rousing Elaine from her apathy. "What, all that?" she cried.

Peggy laughed.

"One's the Christmas dinner. And the other has toys for the children. O, you needn't look so surprised. I haven't been extravagant. I've only taken up a collection in a few families where there are children, and got a lot of play-things they were tired of. Dick and I worked like Trojans, mending up things. Dick's a genius when it comes to glue and that sort of thing."

Peggy pulled off the cover of the basket in her pride. "See those picture books! I made the covers of paste-board, with calico pasted over them. The insides were almost as good as new. Isabel's doll has a new head from the ten cent store, and Estelle's has a wig that belonged to another doll first. Francesca is too old for dolls, I suppose, so there's a little bead necklace for her. And Jimmy and John--"

Elaine interrupted. "Isn't it funny that the girls should have such dressy names, and the boys such every-day ones?"

"Mrs. Dunn names the girls, and Mr. Dunn the boys, that's why. I've got a pocket-knife for Jimmy, and a Noah's ark and things like that for the little boys. I guess it'll seem like quite a Christmas to them, even if the toys are second hand."

Each with a basket on her arm, the two started away toward Glen Echo Avenue. The day was crisp and cool, with a clear sky overhead, and snow, still white and sparkling, underfoot. There were holly wreaths in the windows of almost every house they passed, and something electric tingled in the air, as if the Christmas spirit had broken bounds, and escaping from happy hearts, had charged the very atmosphere. Unconsciously Elaine's step quickened, her face brightened, and her voice, instead of reminding one of drooping flowers, was rather suggestive of bright crisp evergreen.

Over on Glen Echo Avenue the holiday spirit was in evidence. The goat whose acquaintance Peggy had made on previous visits, had a piece of evergreen tied to one horn, and to a vivid imagination it might have seemed that he was trying to enact the role of one of Santa Clans' reindeer. The faces of the children wore an expression of joyful anticipation which made Peggy a little anxious for fear that disappointment lay in wait for some of them. "I hope they'll look as happy to-morrow," she said to Elaine with a sigh. "Dear! I wish I had baskets for

every house instead of just one."

None of the small Dunns were in evidence on the street, and Peggy and Elaine made their way down the rickety stairs which led to the front door, unannounced. But at the first knock the door flew open with a promptness which suggested that someone of the family had been stationed at the knob to act the part of door-keeper. At the sight of Peggy a cry arose. "Ma, it's Jimmy's lady, the pretty one."

Peggy blushed rosily, at hearing herself thus heralded, and went on to the kitchen, her scarlet face under her green hat, looking not unlike an animated sprig of holly. "Merry Christmas, Mrs. Dunn," she cried, "Merry Christmas, children."

Mrs. Dunn who sat in a rocking-chair beside the stove, a woollen scarf tied around her head, seemed rather inclined to resent the tone of the greeting.

"Thank you kindly, Miss I'm sure," she said. "Though breath is cheap and 'Merry Christmas' ain't a'going to fill nobody's stommick." She cast a covetous eye upon the girls' load, and Peggy set the basket of provisions on the table, smiling encouragingly. "I guess you'll find something filling here, Mrs. Dunn," she said. "And plenty of good wishes go with it."

"Don't hardly look sizeable enough to hold a turkey," suggested Mrs. Dunn, eyeing the basket with disfavor.

"No, there isn't a turkey."

"A chicken's a long way from turkey," observed Mrs. Dunn, with an apparent effort to conceal her disappointment. "But I s'pose you could call it the next best thing. A real good-sized chicken now, with stuffin'--"

"There isn't a chicken either, Mrs. Dunn," said Peggy with firmness. "But there's a nice roast of beef, and plenty of potatoes, and other vegetables, and a mince pie, and, O, yes, a tumbler of jelly."

The lips of the little Dunns were all ajar as if to give visible evidence that their mouths were watering, as Peggy recited the menu of their Christmas dinner, but Mrs. Dunn, evidently feeling that she owed it to herself to regard the traditions of the day, underwent an evident struggle before she could bring herself to the point of magnanimity.

"O, well," she said at last, "roast beef is fillin', even if 'tain't what you could call temptin'. I s'pose it's my complication that makes me peckish about my victuals." She turned sharply upon the children, who were nudging one another, repeating with joyful giggles, "Mince pie!" "Jelly!" Her frown reduced them to instant gravity.

"What ails you, anyway?" demanded Mrs. Dunn. "Act like you never had a Christmas dinner in all your lives."

Peggy steered the conversation from the delicate subject by opening the other basket, and now it would have taken more than Mrs. Dunn's frown to have

suppressed the children's hilarity. There was a chorus of voices, shrill squeals, which might have expressed almost anything from acute physical anguish to ecstasy, and really did stand for the latter, gurgles of excited laughter, questions that ran into one another, without waiting for answers, a medley of happy voices which perhaps comes the nearest to perfect Christmas music than any since Bethlehem.

"Look, Ma. It's got shoes and stockings."

"There's animals in this here house. It's a zoolog'cal garden."

"See the baby! Don't he like Christmas, though!"

The baby, indeed, was entering splendidly into the spirit of the occasion. A rattle in one hand, a rubber cow in the other, he regarded his laughing brothers and sisters with a responsive grin, revealing gums guiltless of teeth. "The dear!" said Peggy with a little gulp, for all this artless joy had touched some of those sensitive nerves which lie between pain and pleasure. Peggy was laughing with the rest, but her eyes were dewy.

A mew outside of the door broke in on this hilarity. "It's Jimmy's kitty," screamed Estelle, crossing the kitchen with a hop, skip and jump. "She knows Christmas has come and she wants to be in it."

The kitten for whose rescue Jimmy Dunn had fought so valiantly, showed great improvement over her miserable self on the occasion which Peggy so vividly remembered. She could not be called a handsome cat, even now. A fractured tail had been among the injuries sustained in the hardships of her earlier existence, and that member was carried on one side, in a manner suggesting excessive weight. Though no longer muddy, her fur was by no means clean, and the hollowness of her sides reflected on the Dunns' bounty. Yet she purred, as she entered, arching her back, and craning her neck under Estelle's caresses in a fashion which proved conclusively that though the fare night be meagre at times there was no lack of kindness in the Dunn establishment for the little outcast.

"O, here's Violetta," Peggy cried. Owing to the sex of Jimmy's protégé, Mrs. Dunn had assumed the responsibility of naming her, bestowing on the waif the name that would have been given to Bill, the baby, if his turning out a boy had not transferred the right of decision from his mother to his father. Peggy rummaged in the bottom of her basket, as the Dunns, one after another, stroked Violetta's back, with grimy fingers, and displayed their new acquisitions. "Where has that package gone to?" scolded Peggy. "I hope I haven't forgotten Violetta's present. O, no, here it is."

The small Dunns were bursting now with joyful curiosity, and when Peggy produced a small package from the corner into which it had rolled, and held it close to Violetta's nose, the hush in the kitchen was like the lull that precedes a storm. The storm broke in wild outcries and hilarious laughter when Violetta, having

sampled the catnip, threw herself on her ridging backbone, waved her four paws in the air, and indulged in a low rumbling purr, like the sound of distant thunder. Even Mrs. Dunn deigned to smile.

"Law now!" she exclaimed. "That ain't no common alley cat. She acts like she sensed it was Christmas, same as a human."

In spite of Peggy's early start, the dark was coming on when they got away. Elaine slipped her hand through her friend's arm in a fashion that almost had the effect of a caress. More wonderful still, meeting Peggy's eyes, she smiled spontaneously, not as though it cost her an effort.

"It *was* nice, Peggy," she acknowledged. "But at first I thought I wasn't going to like it a bit. How do you put up with that woman?"

Peggy smiled indulgently. "Mother says," she quoted, "that 'gratitude is the flower of human nature at its best.' I used to scold about some of the people she helped, because it seemed to me that they didn't half appreciate it. But she always told me that it wasn't fair to expect too much gratitude from poor, ignorant people. I guess it's a good thing not to start out with your expectations too high. It keeps you from being disappointed."

"Your mother is so good, Peggy," Elaine said rather wistfully. "It's no wonder--" She checked herself as if fearful of being misunderstood. "Anyway it was lovely to see the children," she hurried on, with a quick change of tone. "For a few minutes I felt as if it were really Christmas, and that's more than I expect to feel again this year."

Peggy stared down the street, resolutely repressing a smile. She had good reason for knowing that Elaine was soon to have another reminder of the arrival of Christmas. She ran up to her room the minute she reached home, to take a look at the miniature Christmas tree, which Dick was to place on Elaine's door-step as soon as it was dark enough so that he could venture out without being seen. It stood up bravely in a big flower-pot, plainly refusing to be considered insignificant because of its diminutive stature. Festoons of popcorn and tinsel hung on its boughs and gaudy ornaments made bright spots of color among the green. Each of the girls had contributed some little gift. Peggy, knowing Elaine's sensitive pride, had emphasized the point that the presents were to be the merest trifles. Rhymes accompanied each, showing varied poetical endowments on the part of the givers. Amy, after having devoted several hours to the composition of something appropriate and effective, had finally fallen back on the couplet,

"When this you see
Remember me."

Peggy, as self-appointed committee on arrangements, was very near rejecting

this as unworthy the occasion. It was only Amy's pathetic appeal and her bringing into evidence the sheets of foolscap, scrawled over with her vain attempts to be witty and epigrammatic, which caused Peggy's resolution to weaken, and led her at last to accept reluctantly a contribution which could hardly be considered original.

Altogether it was a brave little tree, as significant of good will as if its tip had brushed the ceiling. It was like a cheery visible voice crying, "Merry Christmas." Peggy felt sure that at the sight of it Elaine would be forced to revise her wish that she could sleep through the twenty-fifth of December without once waking.

Peggy's Christmas day was very much like other Christmas days. Indeed it is difficult to find a new fashion in Christmases, which will be any improvement on the standard variety. There were the usual thrilling moments when the stockings were rifled. As always there were little gifts put into big boxes and larger gifts skilfully concealed, so their presence could not be discovered till the last moment. There were the usual kisses and assurances that everything was exactly what everybody had been hoping for, words that somehow seemed to counteract the frost and chill of the season, and make the December world as balmy as June.

Of course Peggy had to make a number of Christmas calls along the Terrace, to see how beautifully everyone had been remembered, equally of course, the other girls all dropped in on Peggy during the day. That the stock of superlatives in the language had not given out long before the twenty-fifth of December drew to its close was proof positive that the supply was inexhaustible.

Peggy smiling, sleepy, and with the satisfying consciousness that everything had turned out just as she had hoped, was ready to go upstairs to bed, when the telephone bell rang. A sweet voice, with a plaintive undertone, spoke her name.

"Is this Peggy Raymond?"

"Yes, this is Peggy. But I'm afraid I don't recognize your voice."

"It's a little late to wish you a Merry Christmas, I'm afraid. But I couldn't let the day close without good wishes of some sort. May the new year bring you all the happiness you deserve. I don't think I could wish you anything better than that."

There was an earnestness in the strange voice that went to Peggy's heart. "Thank you ever so much," she answered gratefully. "But I'm sure that every year, so far, has brought me lots of happiness I didn't deserve at all. It's queer," she added, changing the subject hastily, "But I can't seem to think who you are."

"A girl who does as much as you do to make other people happy," the strange voice persisted, "deserves the best of everything. Good-night, Peggy, dear."

"But who--" Peggy was beginning, when a little click told her that her question, if completed, would fall on the empty air. She hung up the receiver, per-

plexed and as near disappointed as was possible at the close of so perfect a day.

"Why didn't she say who she was?" Peggy asked herself. "It seems as if I ought to remember a voice so sweet, but it didn't sound a bit familiar." She paused at the door of the parlor to take a last look at the denuded Christmas tree, and the table where the gifts were still displayed, for the benefit of friends who might drop in within a day or two, and went slowly to her room. But in her dreams, she heard again and again a gentle voice, pensive and sweet, whispering, "A happy new year to dear Peggy Raymond."

CHAPTER XIV

A DISAGREEMENT

It was a doleful Peggy who, coming home late one drizzly January afternoon, found the gas lighted in the living-room and Ruth waiting for her. Peggy acknowledged her friend's presence by a rueful smile, immediately extinguished by an unseasonable shower, as sudden as an April rain.

"There! There! Don't cry, Peggy. I know exactly how you feel." Ruth administered consolation in the shape of sundry comforting pats, while Peggy burrowed in the sofa cushions and sniffed without restraint. "It's dreadful to have them both go at once," she explained in a stifled voice.

"Of course it is."

"I suppose I ought to be glad that Alice is well enough to have Dorothy home again. She must have missed her every minute. I know I shall." A sob.

"Nobody could help it. Such a darling child!"

"Of course she can't travel by herself, and mother was hankering to see Alice, and, besides, she needed a rest. I'm a perfect goose, so there!" Peggy sat up, wiping her eyes with a severity that might have been intended to warn them against repeating their late indiscretion.

Ruth hastened to defend her friend against herself. "You're nothing of the land. Anybody'd cry. And coming home after people have gone away is always dreadful."

"That's why you're here, isn't it?" Peggy gave Ruth's hand a grateful squeeze. "I could hardly get up my courage to come in, till I remembered something I wanted to tell Sally about the supper. You see I am housekeeper now."

"I'm afraid it will be pretty hard for you."

"O, no indeed." Peggy spoke with her usual blitheness. "Sally's splendid if she's looked after. Of course she hasn't any head-piece, but she's as willing as the day is long."

The sudden entrance of the object of this eulogy cut it short. Sally was dressed for the street, even to a faded cotton umbrella tucked under her arm at such an angle that the point would endanger the eyesight of all pedestrians. "I'm leaving," she announced cheerfully.

As Peggy's amazement temporarily bereft her of the powers of speech, Ruth was driven to expostulate. "You don't mean you're going away to stay? You wouldn't do that, I'm sure."

"My step-aunt's husband's had a stroke," explained Sally with unimpaired cheerfulness. "It's his second and 'tain't likely he'll last long. I wouldn't miss his fun'rel for anything."

Peggy by this time was capable of remonstrance. "But, Sally, wait till the time is set for the funeral. He may live some time yet. Just think how hard it will be for me if you leave me while mother's away."

Ordinarily Sally would have been touched by this plea. She was a reliable creature, on the whole, and devoted to the Raymonds, one and all. But the temptation afforded by the serious illness of her step-aunt's husband was of no common sort.

"My goodness, Miss Peggy!" she exclaimed indignantly. "The fun'rel ain't the whole show. I wouldn't miss his last hours for anything you could name. My step-aunt's sister from West Virginia will come on, like enough, to say nothin' of her kin up in Lester County. I ain't the sort o' girl to slight my duties every time the circus comes to town," declared Sally impressively, "but a reel death in the fambly don't happen every day, and 'twould be flying in the face of Providence not to take notice."

If Peggy had looked forward to a pensive evening, with leisure for occasional tears, this unexpected development necessitated an immediate change of program. She had neglected her lessons for the next day in helping her mother to get away, and the sudden accession of Sally's duties in addition to her own meant that every minute must be accounted for. When her father went to bed that night he stood in the doorway for a full minute, his glance travelling from the clock to the desperate figure of his daughter. Peggy's elbows were planted on the table, while her hands clutched her hair, and her lips moved noiselessly. On the whole, her attitude suggested Lady Macbeth rather than a high school girl, poring over one of the gems of English literature.

"Daughter."

Peggy did not hear.

"Daughter, it is eleven o'clock."

Peggy jumped.

"O, yes, father. I'll go to bed as soon as I have finished reading this canto." She bent again over the page, but her father was not satisfied.

"If Sally's likely to be gone any time, I think your mother had better come back. It won't do, you know, to have you overworking--"

Peggy whirled about, quite forgetting the "Fairie Queen." "O, father, don't do that. I'll get along splendidly. It would be such a shame to spoil mother's visit with Alice. And Sally may be back any day. I wouldn't have them know for anything."

Mr. Raymond went upstairs only half convinced, as Peggy guessed from his expression. She made up her mind that in the future when it was necessary for her to study late she would do it in her own room, where it would disturb nobody. She further decided on rising at five o'clock to get as much as possible of the day's work out of the way before school.

Peggy's plan might have been feasible had she ever learned the gentle art of slighting. Perhaps there was an atom of foolish pride at the bottom of her determination to keep the house in as scrupulous order as if her mother and Sally had both been present to assist. She was out of bed long before daylight every morning, sweeping and dusting, rubbing and polishing, till by breakfast time she was faint and tired, and found it necessary to scrub her cheeks violently with a rough crash towel before she dared trust herself under her father's eyes. With her mother the stratagem would probably have failed, but Mr. Raymond seeing the blooming cheeks and vivacious smile of the young person behind the coffee-pot, said to himself that it looked as if Peggy were getting on all right, and that it would be a pity to spoil his wife's visit, unless it were absolutely necessary.

Dick enjoyed the new regime. Dick heartily approved of his sister's cooking, even going so far as to brag of it in the neighborhood. One of the boys who received the brotherly boasts with a supercilious air, was immediately challenged.

"See here, you don't believe it, do you? I tell you what! You and Tom come 'round to-night to supper. That's all. Just come 'round and see for yourselves."

The challenge was accepted, and Dick went home with the high spirits of one who has defended the family honor. As he passed the kitchen window he experienced a distinct shock. Peggy was visible, but not the blooming Peggy of the morning. She was pale and heavy-eyed and a damp towel tied around her forehead gave the clue. Early rising, late study, and almost continuous work between had resulted in a sick headache, which Peggy, limp and languid, was doing her best to fight off.

Dick stood in the hall, a prey to remorse. Peggy was sick, and he had invited company to supper. He realized, with the fatal clearness, which so often accompanies an afterthought, that even if Peggy had not been suffering, the invitation was distinctly inconsiderate. With her school work, and the cares of the house

on her shoulders, she was doing too much, at the best of times. Ordinarily Dick did not lack courage, but with his conscience against him the prospect of making a full acknowledgment to Peggy was an ordeal from which he shrank.

After ten minutes of aimless waiting Dick pushed open the door and advanced into the kitchen on tiptoe, a relic of earlier days, when he had somehow formed the impression that not making a noise was equivalent to being good. Peggy turned her pale face in his direction.

"Is that you, Dick? I wish--" She broke off, staring with surprise at her brother's crestfallen figure. "Why, Dick? Is anything the matter?"

[image]

"STARING WITH SURPRISE AT HER BROTHER'S CRESTFALLEN FIGURE."

"Yes." The one miserable word came out with uncompromising bluntness.

Peggy was still staring. "But nothing much, is it, Dick?"

"Yes." Dick had taken a surreptitious glance at his sister, and his burden of self-reproach had at once grown heavier. "It's awful."

Peggy's thoughts flew to her mother. Or perhaps Dorothy had met with an accident. She was such a flyaway. Or could it be that Alice-- She dropped into a chair. "Tell me, Dick," she begged, her lips very white.

"I--I hate to so I can't." Shame made Dick's voice tragic.

Peggy's fingers gripped the sides of her chair. Whatever had happened she must control herself. Like one in a dream she heard Dick floundering on.

"Maybe something will happen yet, so--so it won't be so bad." Dick was thinking hopefully that perhaps one of his invited guests would find himself unable to accept.

"Go on," gasped Peggy. But her appearance, instead of encouraging Dick to confession, made it seem impossible.

"I--I guess I'll wait," he choked. "Maybe you'll feel better before supper."

Peggy's strength returned with miraculous suddenness. She pounced upon her brother as he was about to escape. "Tell me now, Dick. I--I can bear it."

"I--" Dick swallowed. "I asked Skits to supper."

Peggy waited stupidly.

"And Tom, too. I wanted to show 'em what a good cook you were."

Another pause. "Go on," prompted a stifled voice. "What about mother?"

It was Dick's turn to be startled. "Mother? Why, has anything happened to mother?"

Peggy's wits were in working order again. "Dick Raymond, you don't mean

that you've almost scared me to death because you invited two boys to supper!" And then, reading in his face that she had hit the mark, Peggy's overtaxed nerves played her false, and she sat down promptly on the floor, where she laughed and cried together.

Poor Dick, at his wit's end, tried vainly to allay the storm. "See here, Peggy. You don't need to have 'em if you don't want 'em." That was when her sobs were most violent. Then with sudden indignation: "I'd like to know what you're laughing at anyway, Peg Raymond. *I* don't see anything funny."

The laughter had the better of the tears at last and Peggy wiped her eyes, took a long breath, and climbed unsteadily to her feet.

"Dick."

"What?"

"The next time you have any bad news to tell, don't try to break it gently. Just blurt it out, no matter what happens. I think that's safer, on the whole." Peggy moved languidly to the sink, where she removed the encircling towel and proceeded to bathe her eyes. "Dick."

"What d'ye want?" The conscience-stricken Dick was on his feet instantly, ready to fly in any direction at a word.

"You needn't tell the boys not to come. If one of the girls will come over and help me, I guess we can fix up some sort of supper. You run and ask Elaine."

But when Dick appeared fifteen minutes later he was accompanied by Priscilla instead of Peggy's next-door neighbor. "Elaine couldn't come," explained Dick. "She's sick, too. Her mother said she couldn't lift her head from the pillow."

It was Priscilla's first intimation that she had been second choice, and, to a girl of her temperament, the news was disquieting. "I'm sorry you couldn't have the one you wanted, Peggy," she said, with dangerous sweetness. "But I'll do my best to take her place." Then catching sight of poor Peggy's swollen eyes and drooping figure, she had the grace to be ashamed of herself.

It was a very good supper, though Peggy, sitting pale and heavy-eyed, at the end of the table, ate little of it. Strawberry preserves, and some of Sally's fruit cookies, had helped out so nicely that it had not been necessary to do much cooking, and in Dick's present state of penitence he would have eaten pine shavings and sworn that they were delicious. As he watched Skits, gorging himself with preserves, Dick suddenly realized that the supper invitation was not at all in accordance with Skits' deserts. "I'd ought to have punched his head when he acted as if he didn't believe about Peggy's cooking," thought Dick, scowling darkly at his unconscious guest. "Just as though everybody along the Terrace didn't know that she's got 'em all skinned."

Unconscious of the regrets disturbing their host's peace of mind, Skits and Tom made out an excellent meal, and withdrew to the next room to examine some

new stamps Dick had recently added to his collection. Priscilla, who had quite recovered from her little pique, pushed Peggy into the rocking-chair, when she attempted to assist with the work.

"You sit still," she scolded. "Don't you dare move! I'll be through the dishes in no time."

The offer was too tempting to refuse. Peggy sat in the kitchen rocking-chair, where Sally rested when her daily labors were over, and watched Priscilla as she proceeded deftly with the work. "It seems a shame," she said, but without conviction, "to leave everything to you."

"Nonsense! As if you weren't always doing things for other people." Priscilla crossed the room to lower the shade and stood transfixed. "I thought Dick said Elaine was sick."

"She hasn't been out of bed to-day. You know she's rather subject to sick attacks," explained Peggy. "But they don't last more than a day or two."

Priscilla's laugh was rather disagreeable. "It hasn't lasted as long as that," she replied. "She's up and dressed. Just passed the window. Rather a remarkable recovery, isn't it?"

Peggy did not speak.

"Elaine isn't particularly fond of housework, I imagine," continued Priscilla, lowering the shade, and turning back to the waiting dishes. "But I'd rather say right out I didn't want to help, than make a pretence of being sick. And especially after all you've done for her, Peggy."

Peggy was in a mood to be an easy prey to suspicion. Tired, half sick, with over-strained nerves, and throbbing temples, it was not strange that for a moment she half believed that Elaine's plea of illness was only an excuse for evading work she did not like. In spite of Peggy's lessons, Elaine still found housekeeping duties very irksome. In a moment, however, Peggy's sense of fairness revolted against the assumption, which for the moment she had accepted as proved.

"Perhaps she felt better, all at once. People often do, after being sick all day."

"She trotted by the window as if she'd never felt better in all her life," remarked Priscilla tartly.

"Maybe her mother exaggerated a little," persisted Peggy. "Or perhaps Dick didn't quite understand."

"O, of course, if you're bound to find excuses for her, Peggy, you can do it. You can excuse anything in anybody, if you simply won't believe what you see with your own eyes." The dishes in the pan clicked ominously, as Priscilla splashed with energy.

Peggy was saved the necessity of replying by the sudden opening of the back door. A tall, ungainly figure appeared on the threshold and the girls united in a rapturous shriek. "Sally!"

Sally came in and removed her coat. Her manner was dejected, and with a pang of conscience Peggy recalled the melancholy reason for her absence, as well as for her return. With a determined effort to keep her own relief out of her voice, she suggested sympathetically "Your uncle, I suppose--"

"My *step*-uncle, Miss Peggy. He's better a'ready, and quarrelling with his victuals. Doctor thinks he'll be out o' bed by the first o' the week. It might have been such a good fun'rel, too," added Sally, with evident disapproval of the ill-timed recovery. "All the Lester County folks was down, and my aunt's sister from West Virginia. Stands to reason she can't pick up and run again very soon. Like enough when he's laid away at last there won't be a baker's dozen, outside the neighbors. I'll finish them dishes, Miss Priscilla. This is a disappointing world sure enough."

Peggy went to bed at eight o'clock and knew nothing more till fifteen minutes of breakfast time. Her head was clear, and the knowledge that Sally was in the kitchen made her light of heart, though her pallor told that she was still in arrears, as far as sleep was concerned. As she dressed with speed, the discovery Priscilla had announced the evening before came back to her, but she was no longer disposed to attach much importance to it.

"Some little mistake, of course, or else Elaine did feel better all at once. I'm sure she wouldn't have tried to fib out of helping me when I wanted her." Peggy was herself again, and nothing could have persuaded her to accept Sally's dictum that it was a disappointing world.

CHAPTER XV

A PATHETIC STORY

"I've got three tickets. We students always have two, you know, and a girl who didn't want to invite anybody gave me her extra one. Amy doesn't care for concerts, and Ruth is going somewhere with Graham. So I thought--"

Priscilla paused impressively. She was about to do an magnanimous thing, and she meant to get full credit.

"I thought perhaps you'd like to have me invite Elaine. Didn't you say she was fond of music?"

Peggy beamed. "She adores it. And it's lovely of you to ask her. Those conservatory concerts are always splendid."

"They get the best talent that's to be had," said Priscilla. "They go on the principle that hearing good music is part of our education." Priscilla was studying the violin in addition to her work in the high-school, and though possessed of no extraordinary talent, was at least learning a better appreciation of the work of the great artists to whom she listened at frequent intervals.

The two girls were on their way home from school. As they reached the Marshall's cottage, Peggy turned in as a matter of course, and Priscilla followed, feeling highly virtuous. She was not a girl who did things by halves, and her manner as she tendered her invitation was unusually sweet and winning.

"Peggy and I are going to the Conservatory concert Friday afternoon, and we want to take you with us. Powell will play, and it'll be a treat."

"Why, it's ever so kind of you. Of course I'd love to go." A glimmer of suspicion flashed out beneath Elaine's gratitude. She had learned to accept Peggy's kindnesses at their face value, without looking for an ulterior motive. But with Priscilla it was different. Out of Peggy's especial friends Priscilla was the one, Elaine felt sure, who liked her least, and her pleasure in the invitation was lessened by her wonder as to what had called it forth.

Peggy was chattering on gaily. "We'll go early, so as to watch the people come in. I think that's half the fun. We sit so high up that I am afraid to lean forward for fear of falling down, I don't know how many stories, but I hold on tight, and crane my neck so as not to miss anybody."

"You sit high up?" repeated Mrs. Marshall, breaking in on her animated if not literal description. "Is it possible that the management does not furnish orchestra seats to the students?"

"We sit in the second balcony," Priscilla replied, with a flash of resentment which was not allayed by Mrs. Marshall's manner of receiving the announcement.

"And is there really any danger of falling?" Mrs. Marshall was appealing to Peggy. "I have always been accustomed to a box. Dear papa was fond of music, but he invariably secured a box, and he was exceedingly particular about my gowns because we were so conspicuous. But the second balcony! Really I don't know."

Peggy hastened to allay the fears occasioned by her incautious figure of speech, and Elaine said hurriedly and with apparent sincerity, that she shouldn't enjoy a minute if she sat in a box. It was perhaps due to an effort, conscious or unconscious, to atone for her mother's implication, that Elaine blossomed into unusual enthusiasm over the proposed pleasure. When Friday came she was still in a particularly appreciative mood, and Priscilla mentally acknowledged that she had never liked the girl so well. She wondered if there was any truth in the theory that Peggy was always advancing, that you were sure to like people if you tried to be nice to them.

The concert justified the girls' anticipations. The great hall was crowded

with an audience of music lovers, and the artist of the occasion was called back again and again, to bow her acknowledgement of the enthusiastic applause. Elaine's sorrowful expression when the last number on the program was reached, was more convincing than even her lament, "O, dear! It can't be over already."

"It's almost five o'clock. But cheer up! There'll be another." Priscilla's smile was thoroughly friendly. Hitherto she had always thought of Elaine as Peggy's especial property, and as an illustration of Peggy's recognized propensity for liking all sorts of people. Now as her thoughts ran ahead to the concert two weeks away, she wondered if by any chance she could secure a ticket for Elaine.

The great throng moved out slowly. Bits of musical criticism came to the girls' ears. The woman afraid of fire made her voice heard as usual, and impressively asked what chance they would have if the building were burning. Someone else called her attention to the emergency exits, and then Peggy lost the thread of the argument in her interest in a new voice which declared, "I know it's the girl. I couldn't be mistaken."

The voice was low but curiously intense. Something in its breathless emotion gripped the attention. Peggy turned her head, and found that Priscilla had done the same. The woman who had spoken was just behind them. She and her companion were leaning toward each other with an air of suppressed excitement which impressed Peggy unpleasantly, and it did not relieve her inexplicable sense of apprehension to discover that the eyes of the two were fixed upon Elaine's slender figure, a little in advance.

"Just wait till she turns," said the woman who had spoken before, and at that moment Elaine glanced back, as if to locate her companions in the slow-moving crowd. The smile on her face died away, as she met the fixed stare of two pairs of observant eyes.

"There!" Triumph was evident in the woman's tone. "It is the girl, just as I said. I should know her among a thousand."

With loyalty as intuitive as her breathing Peggy pushed forward, intending to place herself at Elaine's side. Though the woman who had professed to recognize her had said nothing to her discredit there was something beneath her triumphant tone which suggested an unpleasant reason for satisfaction in the discovery. But to overtake Elaine seemed impossible. Her departure suggested a panic-stricken flight. Before her companions had reached the top of the long flight of stairs she had disappeared.

"Where do you suppose she's gone?" Priscilla, pushing after Peggy, asked the question with an intonation whose meaning was unmistakable. Peggy, looking up, saw her own questioning exaggerated into suspicion on the face of the other.

"I don't know."

"She must have fairly trampled people underfoot. Say, Peggy, I suppose you

heard?"

"Ye-es." It was a most reluctant affirmative, but Priscilla was too absorbed in her own thoughts to notice.

"It wouldn't mean anything by itself. But when she sees she's recognized, and runs away, it looks funny. I wonder if she'll wait for us?"

In the throng at the door of the concert hall, the girls could discover no trace of Elaine. Automobiles glided to the curb as their numbers were called through a megaphone, and the people who block the sidewalks on such occasions, stood in chattering groups, unmindful of the desperate attempts others were making to pass them. But at length the crowd thinned sufficiently for the two girls to assure themselves on the point in question. They looked at each other, and for a moment did not speak.

"Well!" Priscilla's tone was dry. "She isn't here."

"No," Peggy was driven to confess, "she's not here."

"We might as well go home. I don't know what you think about it, Peggy Raymond, but it looks pretty queer to me."

Peggy was not communicative. In silence they walked to the cars two blocks away, and on the corner they found Elaine. It was not the enthusiastic Elaine of the concert, not the self-sufficient Elaine, familiar ever since her arrival on the Terrace. She looked pale and wan and harassed.

For her extraordinary flight Elaine offered no explanation. "I thought I'd wait for you here," she said faintly.

"We didn't know that. We've been waiting for you there." Priscilla's tone indicated that she expected something more, but apparently Elaine did not realize the need either of explanation or apology. But as they climbed up into the car, she looked so faint and frail that without thinking, Peggy took her arm to steady her. At the touch Elaine lifted her eyes with a grateful look which had the effect of sweeping away all Peggy's suspicions, like a spring freshet. Peggy made no pretence to being logical. All she asserted was that sometimes she "just knew things."

The ride to Friendly Terrace was silent and constrained. At Priscilla's door Elaine faltered her thanks for a pleasant afternoon and Priscilla replied stiffly. As she went up the walk, Elaine turned to Peggy with unmistakable relief.

"Is it too late for me to go home with you? There's something I want to tell you where nobody'll hear."

"There's all kinds of time. Father doesn't get home to-night till quarter of seven." Peggy led the way into the house, evaded a categorical reply to her mother's smiling inquiries if they had had a pleasant time, and conducted Elaine to her room, where she pulled forward the wicker rocker.

"That's the most easy-going chair in the whole room. Sit down and be com-

fortable. But, first, take off your coat. It's so warm."

Elaine obeyed automatically. "Peggy," she said as she took her seat, "you saw that woman looking at me so hard to-day?"

"Yes," Peggy acknowledged, "I saw her."

"And she said something, didn't she, to the woman with her?"

"She said she'd know you among a thousand, that's all. And see here, Elaine. Don't tell me anything you don't want to, just because of that."

Elaine put her hands to her head, with a gesture which wrung Peggy's heart. "But I do want to tell. I've got to tell somebody. Sometimes--" her voice rose in a little cry--"Sometimes I've thought I'd go crazy, keeping it to myself."

Peggy pulled up a chair and sat down. She was used to confidences. People of the stamp of Peggy Raymond must expect to be receptacles for the various woes of all sorts and conditions of people. But she realized that what Elaine had to tell was something out of the ordinary, and lost a fraction of her usual bright color.

"I knew those women," Elaine explained, twisting her interlaced fingers. "But they didn't know me. They thought I was my sister."

"I didn't know you had a sister!" Surprise was responsible for Peggy's exclamation.

"I'm several years younger than Grace, but there's a strong resemblance. It was her picture you found that day, Peggy."

"And she died. How dreadful it must have been--" Peggy's sympathetic voice ceased suddenly, as Elaine's look of agitation told her that she had guessed wrong. "She's not dead," Elaine said breathlessly. "She's living, and what's more, she's living here, Peggy."

"Here?"

"On Friendly Terrace."

Peggy had been prepared for unusual disclosures, but this was more than she had bargained for. It was a good half minute before she could answer except by an incredulous stare.

"On Friendly Terrace? In the next house?"

"Yes."

"You don't mean that she's been living there ever since you came?"

"Yes."

"I don't see--why, I never heard of such a thing." But light was pouring in on Peggy. A number of matters that had puzzled her and even aroused her suspicion, suddenly became intelligible in view of the fact that the next-door cottage housed two girls instead of one. "But why--" she began breathlessly, and then checked herself.

"That's what I wanted to tell you, Peggy. It wasn't a year ago that it all

happened, and it seems the bigger half of my life. Grace was a Junior in college. It was hard to keep on with her course, after father died, but she wanted to finish. She was engaged to a young lawyer, Carlton Ross his name was, and everybody thought he was such a nice fellow and that Grace was so fortunate."

Elaine's hands were clasping and unclasping convulsively, as she told her story. Peggy laid her warm brown hand over the trembling fingers, and there was a world of friendly comfort in its clasp.

"One Saturday Grace went down town to do a little shopping, and she stopped at a jeweller's and asked to look at some diamond brooches. Some people could never understand why she did it, for, of course, she couldn't have bought diamonds any more than she could have bought the moon. I suppose it was rather silly, but surely it isn't unheard of, Peggy, for people to examine things they can't afford to buy. Anyway that was what Grace did. And when she said she didn't care to buy, and started to go out, the clerk stopped her and said he begged her pardon but there was a brooch missing."

Peggy uttered a horrified exclamation.

"Yes, but that was only the beginning. Grace went back, and they looked all over the counter, and the floor-walker came up, and things began to be dreadful. And then they said that she would have to be searched. Only think! Grace was almost ready to faint, she was so frightened. It was like a terrible dream, she said. It didn't seem as if it could be such things were really happening to her. And then she thought of Carlton, and begged them to telephone for him, and he came."

Peggy heaved a sigh of relief.

"O, but that was the worst of all. For when he heard about it, he asked if he might speak to her alone, and then he begged her to confess. Yes, Peggy, he thought she stole it. You see he knew that she hadn't any money for buying diamonds, and the only way he could explain what she had done was to take it for granted that she was a thief. And then Grace lost her courage. If Carlton didn't believe in her, nobody would. She screamed out that she wished she were dead, and they heard it and thought it proved that she was guilty."

Sympathetic Peggy was in tears by now, but Elaine's eyes were bright and dry. The recital of her sister's wrongs had brought them before her vividly, and her voice was bitter as she continued.

"You can't have any idea of what we went through for nearly two days. They couldn't find the brooch and Grace was arrested. She wouldn't let Carlton do anything for her, and an old friend of papa's went her bail. There were columns about it in the papers, and Grace's picture and all about papa, and then all at once it proved to be a mistake. The brooch had been sent to some customer, along with several others for inspection, and there was some blunder about returning it. They sent it back finally, and Grace was cleared of all suspicion, but her life

was ruined."

Peggy protested. "Ruined! Why, she was innocent."

"O, you don't know, Peggy. First there was Carlton, and, of course, Grace broke her engagement the instant she found he didn't believe in her. But he wasn't the only one. Our friends were so sorry for us, but we didn't want them to be sorry. We wanted them to be angry and say it was an outrage, as if they meant it. They made excuses for Grace. Said she'd been used to having so much and that since papa's death things had been so different, and they pitied mamma and me because of our disgrace. When I came here to Friendly Terrace I hated everybody in the world. I thought I never would make a friend again as long as I lived. And I'd have kept my word, I guess, if it hadn't been for you, Peggy."

"You poor darling!" Peggy's arm slipped around Elaine's shoulder, and tightened in a comforting hug. But her thoughts were busy still with the account of the tragedy to which she had just listened. "How long is your sister going to stay hidden away?" she demanded abruptly.

Elaine sighed. "As long as she lives, I guess. She doesn't feel as if she could face people."

"I don't know why. It's the ones who made the mistake who ought to hang their heads. Grace hasn't done anything to be ashamed of."

"I suppose we could have sued the firm," Elaine said wearily. "Mamma's lawyer urged it. But Grace, and all of us, for that matter, felt that we'd gone through all we could bear, and that any more publicity would only make things worse. Of course Grace never left the house in daylight, but whenever mamma and I went out we were stared at as if we'd been curiosities, and we could see people talking about us, and telling the whole story over again. It was such a comfort to come here where nobody knows. At least mamma and I felt so, but poor Grace couldn't get her courage up to let herself be seen even here."

Peggy frowned reflectively. "I don't see how she manages to keep hidden that way."

"It isn't as hard as you might suppose. You notice that we always keep both doors locked, and the shades are drawn a good deal. Grace helps in the housework, and comes down to her meals, just as we do. The afternoon she generally spends upstairs, especially since you girls have got in the way of dropping in after school. And she likes you, Peggy. She sits in a little room at the head of the stairs, and she can hear nearly everything that is said. It's funny, when you didn't even know there was such a person, but she feels real well acquainted with you."

"O!" cried Peggy, another mystery becoming luminous, by virtue of this explanation. "I wonder if it wasn't Grace who telephoned me--"

"On Christmas night? Yes. We'd been talking about you all day, and saying what a dear you were, and admiring the little tree, along about bed-time, Grace

said all at once, 'I never expected to wish anybody a happy new year again, but I'm going to wish one to Peggy Raymond.' And she marched over to the telephone, while mamma and I sat there too surprised to say a word."

Peggy pressed her friend's hand, too touched for the moment to speak. This innocent girl, hiding from view like a criminal, held prisoner by her own morbid shrinking, would have impressed a less sympathetic imagination than Peggy's, as a pathetic figure. "And she never goes out of doors," she said, following out her line of thought.

"Sometimes she slips out on the porch when it is very late. Amy saw her there last Halloween."

"To be sure. I think Amy always flattered herself that she really saw a ghost that night." It occurred to Peggy as the words left her lips, that out of all of Amy's superstitious fancies, this was nearest the truth. "I wish," she went on slowly, "that she'd begin to show herself, and see people. It's a dreadful way to live, dreadful! Don't you think she'd be willing to see me? You said that she liked me."

Elaine's alarm at the mere suggestion impressed Peggy, more than anything yet said, with the seriousness of the situation. "If she knew I'd told you all this, she'd never forgive me in the wide world," declared Elaine paling at the thought. "And as for seeing you! No, Peggy! But you can't think what a comfort it is that you know."

"I'm glad," said Peggy, kissing her. But, as a matter of fact, she was far from being satisfied. Anybody could listen to another's troubles. Peggy wanted to be something more than a sympathetic confidante, but it seemed that for the present she must content herself with this passive form of helpfulness.

CHAPTER XVI

A BELATED INVITATION

Priscilla's curiosity grew over night. When she waked Saturday morning, she found herself unable to think of anything but the singular episode of the preceding afternoon. She recalled the absorbed faces of the women who had watched Elaine, the suppressed eagerness of their triumph, when she turned about, and lastly Elaine's incomprehensible panic over finding herself observed. Priscilla racked her brains for a possible explanation, but her imagination was unequal to suggesting any that was creditable to Peggy's next-door neighbor.

It was not long after breakfast when she presented herself at Peggy's door in the hopes that Peggy might be able to throw light on the situation. Peggy was doing the chamber work on the second floor, and Priscilla was glad to assist in the ceremony of bed-making, because of the opportunity this afforded for an uninterrupted discussion of the mystery.

"I want to talk with you about yesterday," she said in the carefully lowered voice which seemed appropriate to the situation, though, as a matter of fact, she might have shouted without attracting anybody's attention. "I've thought about it all night."

"Me, too!" Peggy's tone was enthusiastic. "Especially that *andante* movement."

"O, Peggy!" Priscilla twitched a sheet with an energy that pulled it away from the foot of the mattress, and sent Peggy hurrying to repair damages. "What nonsense! As though I was thinking of *andante* movements, or any other kind. I mean about Elaine."

"Wasn't it nice to see how she enjoyed it? She really knows a lot about music, and the more you know, the better you appreciate it, especially classical music." Peggy was clearly talking against time, advancing her by no means original views with an earnestness which was far beyond their deserts. Priscilla was conscious of a feeling of irritation.

"She did seem to enjoy the music, I'll admit. But apparently she doesn't enjoy meeting old acquaintances. Quite the opposite."

"She didn't meet any old acquaintances," said Peggy quietly.

"Those women thought they knew her, even before she turned around, and after that they were sure."

"They might have been mistaken for all that." Peggy smoothed the comforter anxiously, as if to have it lie without a wrinkle was the most important matter under consideration.

"If they were mistaken, why did Elaine run? The suspicious thing was her being frightened to death, the minute she found anybody noticing her. If she hadn't done anything to be ashamed of--"

Peggy felt the time had come to discard the policy of evasion. She straightened herself, looking across the billowing bed-clothes, straight into her friend's eyes. "Elaine hasn't any reason to be ashamed of anything she has done."

"What *is* the matter, then?"

"There's nothing I can tell, Priscilla."

"Nothing you will tell, you mean. If you know about it, it wouldn't be any more than friendly to explain."

"There's nothing I can tell," repeated Peggy firmly. Priscilla found the reiteration irritating.

"I suppose she's confided everything to you, and expects that we'll take your word for her. Well, I won't, for one. We don't know anything about her, except that she can be mighty disagreeable when she tries, and yesterday capped the climax. I sha'n't have anything more to do with her till I know what it all meant."

"That's for you to decide." Peggy's tone was decidedly cool. Her hands trembled as she twitched the coverlets into place. The intensity of her sympathy, kindled by Elaine's pitiful story, perhaps rendered her incapable of doing full justice to Priscilla. Unfortunately her manner fired the jealous resentment which was Priscilla's greatest weakness.

"Of course if you're going to take sides with her, Peggy Raymond, against your best friends, if you're going to throw me over just because--"

"How silly!" snapped Peggy. "O, please, Priscilla, don't pull those bedclothes up from the foot again."

Priscilla's face was white. "I see I'm in the way. That girl has spoiled our friendship. You've never been the same, Peggy, since Elaine Marshall moved to Friendly terrace."

"How silly!" exploded Peggy, angered by the injustice of the charge and momentarily abandoning her usual tactful methods. "As if anybody but our two selves could spoil our friendship." She watched Priscilla's dignified withdrawal without protest. She was tired of these scenes, she told herself. It was time Priscilla had a good lesson. She punched a pillow into place with a vehemence implying that she held it solely responsible for all that had occurred.

As for Priscilla she closed the door behind her with the feeling that she had burned her bridges, and that no retreat was possible. All was over. She had been very fond of Peggy, but Peggy's fashion of losing her head over every new girl who came to the Terrace was bound to grow tiresome. Peggy had clearly indicated on which side her sympathies lay. She had chosen Elaine in preference to the friend of many years standing. By the time Priscilla was at her own door she was ready to believe that she had been most unfairly treated.

Priscilla was not the sort of girl to rest quietly under a grievance. Her first impulse was to assert herself, to prove to all observers how little she cared. Accordingly she burst in upon her mother with the request, "May I have some of the girls to luncheon next Saturday, mother? I don't mean two or three; I'd like a dozen or so, a real party--"

"Let me see." Mrs. Combs was accustomed to these impulsive outbreaks on Priscilla's part. "What day is Saturday?"

"The thirteenth."

"I have an invitation to luncheon myself for that day; still you could manage without me, I dare say."

"O, yes. I don't want anything elaborate, only nice, you know. And Susan's

cousin can come to wait on the table. She does it very nicely, and doesn't charge much of anything." Priscilla hurried to her writing desk, and pulled out her note paper. A party without Peggy! Could there be a better way of asserting herself and proving how little she was moved by the loss of Peggy's friendship. She dashed off the invitations as hastily as if she were afraid to give herself time for reflection.

Peggy was not long in hearing of Priscilla's luncheon party, and the non-appearance of her invitation was a secret she kept to herself. That she was hurt, goes without saying. The two girls had been friends for years, and, up to this time, Peggy's ground of complaint had been the excess of the other's affection, rather than any lack. It was hard to believe that Priscilla was planning so pronounced a slight. She tried to make herself believe that there was some mistake, but the passing days brought the conviction that the omission was deliberate, and that the chief purpose of the little festivity was her open humiliation.

This would have been bad enough, but, to make matters worse, Peggy's conscience took a hand. An uncompromising monitor was this same conscience, sternly denying Peggy the luxury of self-pity, and arraigning her in a fashion little short of merciless. Ardently it pleaded Priscilla's cause. Her suspicions of Elaine were not without foundation. Peggy herself might have shared them had it not been for the extraordinary story to which she had listened. In any case, she had failed to show the patience due one friend from another. She who prided herself on her tact, had been brusque and tactless. Knowing poor Priscilla's weakness, she had not been on her guard. She had lost her friend, and for her comfort had the reflection that it was, in part at least, her own fault.

It was a blue week for Peggy, and hardly better for Priscilla. She studied cook books, planned out her menu, and tried to think that her low spirits were due to dreadful doubts as to Susan's salad dressing, while all the time she knew that she missed Peggy. She wanted to ask her opinion as to whether to order the ices from Bird's or Connally's, and to consult her about the place cards. How loyally Peggy would have counselled and lent her aid. Many a time she had helped some distracted hostess till she had barely time to fly home and change her dress before the appointed hour.

Saturday was cloudless, a fact which Priscilla came near resenting. Grey skies and a drizzle of rain would have harmonized better with her mood. Mrs. Combs was puzzled by the overcast face her daughter brought down to breakfast.

"What is it, child? Anything wrong with your plans?"

"No, I guess everything's all right," Priscilla responded in the most doleful of voices.

"A pleasant hostess is the chief factor in making pleasant guests. I advise smoothing a few of those wrinkles out of your forehead when you attend to the

rest of your toilet," advised Mrs. Combs, smilingly, and she was more puzzled than ever when Priscilla received her counsel with a sigh.

The luncheon hour was set for one o'clock, but at half past twelve, the girls began to arrive, formality never being much in evidence on Friendly Terrace.

"Wonder if Peggy's here yet," Ruth remarked, as she stood before Priscilla's mirror, giving her hair the little caressing pats whose importance every girl understands.

"I don't believe Peggy is coming." It was Blanche Estabrook who made the remark, apparently without realizing its importance.

Ruth and Amy whirled about. "Not coming!" they exclaimed in a breath.

"She was on Elaine Marshall's back steps talking to her as I came by. She had on a blue gingham, and that didn't look very much like going out to luncheon." Blanche ran down the stairs, leaving Amy and Ruth gazing blankly at each other.

"Now I think of it, I believe something has been wrong all the week," Amy exclaimed. "Priscilla has kept to herself, hasn't she? I don't remember her walking home from school with Peggy."

"I don't believe she has. To think of her not asking Peggy!" Ruth gave a refractory lock a jerk which threatened to undo, all in a moment, the result of much patient labor. "I really think I wouldn't have come myself if I'd known."

Downstairs the early arrivals were chatting gaily. Ruth and Amy descended together to join them, feeling little in the mood for festivity of any sort. "If it had been anybody but Peggy," Amy said, angrily on the way down, and Ruth replied, "Seems as if there must be some mistake, Amy. Perhaps she'll come after all."

The doorbell rang several times before one o'clock, but no breathless Peggy appeared, apologizing for the delay, and smiling on everybody. Ruth made no effort to be entertaining, but sat watching the door, and making absent replies to the girl who sat next her. Amy, too, was uneasy, and curious little lulls occurred in the conversation, a phenomenon almost unheard of when a group of girls are together.

"Well, I believe we're all here," Priscilla announced at last. "Excuse me for a minute, while I tell Susan." She rose and stepped into the hall. In an instant Amy had followed, closing the door behind her.

"Priscilla!" Amy's excited tones were plainly audible in the room where the girls sat waiting, though not her words. "You don't mean that these girls are all the party."

"Certainly they're all." Priscilla eyed her friend suspiciously.

"But there are thirteen of us. Do you think I'd sit down thirteen at the table, and on the thirteenth of the month, too." Amy was very much in earnest. Her plump, good-natured face was actually pale. "I tell you I wouldn't think of such a thing."

"I believe there are thirteen. Rae Fletcher couldn't come." Priscilla had recovered herself in a moment. "But that silly old superstition, Amy. You don't mean--"

"Yes, I do mean it. And there's lots of other people who feel just the same about it." Amy suddenly opened the door of the front room. "Come here, Ruth, we want you a minute."

Ruth made her appearance, expecting to be consulted on a very different matter. Amy's tragic explanation took her by surprise, and she smiled a little. "O, well," she was beginning, and then checked herself, as the possibility of turning Amy's superstitious terrors to good account flashed upon her.

"I simply won't do it," Amy was insisting. "And on the thirteenth of the month, especially. I wouldn't have another peaceful minute all the year. Ruth, why don't you say something?"

"Why don't you ask somebody else and make fourteen." Ruth offered the suggestion nonchalantly, though her pulse had quickened.

"There isn't anybody I can ask at the very last minute. Mother's gone to Mrs.--"

"Why not ask Peggy?"

[image]

"'WHY NOT ASK PEGGY?'"

Amy's excitement over the fatal number of Priscilla's guests had made her temporarily forgetful of her earlier reason for disquiet. At Ruth's master-stroke, she gasped with admiration, and promptly seconded the suggestion. "O, yes, ask Peggy. She's just the one."

Priscilla stood with downcast eyes, and breathlessly her two friends awaited her answer. For a moment the outcome was uncertain. Priscilla was quite capable of resenting such advice, and earlier in the week would undoubtedly have done so. But if Peggy's conscience had been an uncomfortable companion, Priscilla's had not been less active, and her anticipated triumph in having a party without Peggy had proved bitter as Dead Sea fruit. When she spoke, her voice was tremulous, in spite of her efforts to make it sound indifferent.

"O, I don't believe Peggy will come. We had a little misunderstanding, you see."

"It wouldn't do any harm to try," suggested Ruth, still painstakingly matter-of-fact, while Amy added with less tact, "If anybody would do it, it's Peggy. She's the forgivingest thing."

Peggy was at the dinner table when an agitated knocking sounded at the side-door. A breathless voice in the hall made inquiries of Sally. "Somebody to see you, Miss Peggy," was Sally's grudging announcement. She disapproved of people who came at meal time.

To Peggy's amazement it was Priscilla waiting in the hall, Priscilla in her best white frock, and with a pallor that was rather appealing. "I know you won't do it," was her opening remark.

"Won't do what, Priscilla?" Peggy was to be pardoned if her manner was a little formal.

"There are thirteen of us, and Amy won't sit down at all. But it serves me right if my party's spoiled, after treating you that way."

Priscilla gulped. Peggy's manner became less dignified.

"You mean that there's thirteen and you want me for the fourteenth."

"Of course you won't come. But it serves me right to have you say no." Priscilla bit her lip to keep from crying.

Peggy threw a hurried glance at the mirror. "Will my hair do? I've got to change my dress, of course."

"You're going to do it?" Priscilla fairly screamed. "O, Peggy! You're an angel. You can't think how wretched I've been all the week, and how ashamed. O, you darling! Can you ever forgive me?"

They rushed upstairs, their arms about each other's waists. "Don't make me cry," pleaded Peggy, gulping down a sob, "because I really mustn't take time to wash my face, you know. I'll wear my pink; I can get into that in a shake."

It was only fifteen minutes after the hour named on the invitations, that Priscilla's guests sat down to a very dainty and highly successful luncheon. "Do you know, I thought you weren't coming," Blanche Estabrook said to Peggy as they took their seats.

"I'm so sorry to be late and keep everybody waiting," Peggy answered with gentle regret, and that was all most of them knew about the belated invitation. But there was no doubt in the minds of any of the gay crowd that fourteen was a peculiarly lucky number, on any day of the month.

CHAPTER XVII

ELAINE UPSETS TRADITION

Winter as a rule seems long to people in trouble. That year Elaine Marshall found it endless. The steady cold that set in early in January seemed to her relentless, almost vindictive. It was vain to tell herself that spring would return as always, that the branches of the willows by the river would become clouds of misty green, that violets would start in the woods beyond, and the strips of lawn along the Terrace would take on the hue of spring. Intellectually she knew all this to be true, but in her heart was the hopeless conviction that this winter would last forever.

Elaine was having a hard time, and the hardest part of it all was that, however far she looked ahead, she could see no prospect of relief. Mrs. Marshall's economy was of the inconsistent sort, noticeable in people who late in life have begun to realize the value of money. She scrimped over the pennies, and then threw away dollars for something which even to Elaine's inexperience was plainly not indispensable.

Things counted up incredibly. There was the coal bill, for example. Mrs. Marshall had said at first that the dealer must have made a mistake, and then, that he evidently gave short measure, and, finally, she had looked at her daughter with eyes half-frightened. "We can't freeze, Elaine."

"No, we've got to keep warm," the girl returned, but her voice was absent. She was mentally calculating how far their yearly income would stretch at this rate, and the thought of the weeks for which there would be no provision rushed over her with sickening dismay.

She took up her embroidery and fell to work. Since filling Mrs. Summerfield Ely's first order Elaine had received several others from that lady and her friends. She had outgrown her early foolish humiliation over the idea of doing such work for pay. Mrs. Ely treated her with as scrupulous a courtesy as she would have showed any other girl, and gave her work the praise which to the conscientious is always the best of the rewards of toil. At the same time, Elaine's judgment, sharpened by necessity, was grasping the fact that this dainty work, well enough to fill in the leisure minutes, was a very poor dependence when the bread and butter problem was under consideration.

Peggy came in upon her one afternoon, when the dreariness of the grey winter sky seemed to Elaine an inadequate symbol of her own sombre mood. Peggy's arrival was like a rift in the clouds, letting the blue shine through, a real sunbeam visitation. Smiles were not easy for Elaine these days, but her face did brighten noticeably at the sight of Peggy.

"You don't mind if I keep on, I know," she said as Peggy took the nearest chair. "Mrs. Laughlin is in a hurry for this."

"I don't mind your keeping on as far as I'm concerned," Peggy replied, viewing her narrowly. "But I *do* mind the way you're squinting over that embroidery.

What's the matter? Are your eyes hurting you?"

Elaine let the embroidery fall, closing her eyes, and further protecting them by a sheltering hand. "Hurt?" she repeated. "I should think so."

"What's the matter?"

"Too much close work, I suppose. I've kept at it till late two or three nights this week."

"It isn't going to pay you," warned Peggy, "to ruin your eyes for what you can make out of embroidery."

"It doesn't pay anyway," sighed Elaine. "You wouldn't believe how many hours it takes me to earn ten dollars." She had given herself as long a recess as she dared, and she fell to work again, her eyes blinking and suffused with moisture as if reluctant to reassume their duties.

Peggy's silence was unusually prolonged. "I had a new experience this week," she remarked casually at last. "I had a job offered me and refused it."

"A job?" exclaimed Elaine with interest.

"A job?" echoed Mrs. Marshall, her tone indicating horror. There was a startling vulgarity about the term, she reflected. Young ladies might have employment, though occupation was still better. But to get a job was not to be thought of. She shuddered.

"In my Uncle John's office," Peggy explained. "He's a real estate dealer, you know, and he's especially interested in the new suburb they're opening up, Lakeview, they call it. He thinks there's quite an opening in that work for women, and he painted the prospects in such dazzling colors that I really hated to say no."

"Why did you say it, then?" asked Elaine, her manner proving that the inquiry was by no means perfunctory. Mrs. Marshall uttered an exclamation, apparently indicating that the reason was self-evident.

"O, I wouldn't stop before I finished high school for anything. And Uncle John wants somebody right away. If the chance had come after I had graduated I'd have jumped at it, for I've got to earn some money before I go to college."

Elaine folded her work deliberately and laid it on the table. She set her thimble atop, with particular care that it should be exactly in the centre of the pile. Then she looked hard at Peggy.

"What about me?" Elaine demanded abruptly. "Do you think he'd consider me?"

"Elaine!" gasped Mrs. Marshall. But Peggy, overjoyed that the fish had risen so readily to the bait, failed to notice the horrified protest of the mother's tone.

"Would you really take such a position, Elaine?" she cried. "Why, I should think you'd have the best chance in the world. And Uncle John would be such a splendid person to work for. He's a fine business man, everybody says, but not the petrified sort. He's kind and interested and ready to make allowances--"

"Elaine!" said Mrs. Marshall, breaking in on Peggy's eulogy. This time it was impossible to ignore the tone in which she spoke her daughter's name. It was like the crack of a whip.

Both girls looked at her. Poor Mrs. Marshall sat very straight, her thin cheeks aflame. Her expression betokened a conflict between incredulous anger and hurt pride.

"Elaine, you must be taking leave of your senses. What would your grandfather have said at the idea of one of his blood"--Mrs. Marshall hesitated, then evidently concluded that only the objectionable commercial term Peggy had made use of, was equal to the occasion--"one of his descendants getting a *job* in a real estate office?"

"I think grandfather would probably have said that circumstances alter cases," replied Elaine promptly.

Not having had the pleasure of the acquaintance of Mrs. Marshall's late father, Peggy was unable to surmise what that old gentleman's attitude would have been under such conditions. But she hastened to suggest, "Lots of awfully nice girls go into business offices nowadays, Mrs. Marshall."

Elaine was in a reckless mood. "I don't know as it matters what other girls do. It's a question of what I've got to do. We can't sit here and starve, just because grandfather was rich."

"Elaine!" cried Mrs. Marshall with a horror which was at least sincere. To acknowledge, even to Peggy, the pressing character of their need, seemed to the poor lady a shocking piece of indelicacy. Her weak chin quivered, as she struggled with her emotions. Peggy possessed enough of the divine art of putting herself in another's place to realize that the consternation, so absurd from her standpoint, was justified by those views of life to which Mrs. Marshall had always adhered. She racked her head for something which would soften the blow.

"If Elaine is going to work anywhere, Mrs. Marshall, she couldn't be in a better place than Uncle John's office. He'd be good to anybody, but, of course, he'd be especially interested in Elaine as long as she's a friend of mine."

"Young people nowadays," quavered Mrs. Marshall, her sense of injury goading her to injustice, "are not sufficiently mindful of what they owe the family name."

Elaine's flippant laugh jarred Peggy's sense of propriety. She looked at her reproachfully, but Elaine would not meet her eye.

"I suppose that's because we have to think what we owe ourselves," she suggested airily. "Clothes and something to eat, to say nothing of carfare."

"And don't you think," asked Peggy, hurling herself into the breach, "that a girl who does hard things when she has to, and keeps brave and plucky about it, is a credit to any family? Seems to me that her ancestors, whoever they were,

would have reason to be proud of her."

There was a clarion ring in Peggy's voice. Mrs. Marshall looked at her doubtfully, surprised that enthusiasm could be kindled over what to her mind was a disgrace. But Elaine's expression betrayed a sense of guilt.

"Don't try to make a heroine of me, Peggy," she protested. "I'm not brave, nor plucky, nor anything of the kind. It's only that I've got to have the money. If you think there's any chance, let's go to see your uncle right away before he gets anybody else."

The process of bringing Mrs. Marshall to agree to this suggestion occupied some time. Suspecting the weakness of her arguments, the poor lady fell back on tears and reminiscences. The two girls listened to detailed accounts of the lavish expenditure that had prevailed in her father's household, the big dinners, the imported gowns, the liveried coachman. "And to think that my child should be--getting a job," wailed Mrs. Marshall. "O, what would poor papa have said?" It was not so much, perhaps, that the girls' arguments finally had effect, as that the violence of her emotion had reduced her to the point of exhaustion, which accounted for the fact that Elaine and Peggy were at last allowed to depart on their errand without protest.

Peggy's uncle, Mr. John Mannering, was a big grey-haired man, with eyes that twinkled boyishly, and a voice that could be kind or commanding or both in one, on occasion. He asked Elaine a few questions which had the result of making her feel hopelessly ignorant and incompetent, and then sat considering her with a closeness of attention whose curious impersonality resulted in relieving Elaine from all feeling of embarrassment. "He's sizing me up," she thought, and sat waiting without much hope of a favorable verdict. The atmosphere of the real estate office was like a different world from any to which Elaine had been accustomed. The maps upon the wall, the business-like click of the typewriter, the phrases which she caught as people came and went, all were calculated to make her feel how little her life had prepared her for fitting into so methodical a system of activity.

Mr. Mannering turned abruptly to his niece. "Well, Peggy," he exclaimed, with the smile which was conclusive proof that, as Peggy put it, he was not "petrified." "Do I understand that you stand sponsor for this young woman?"

"Yes, sir," returned Peggy, without troubling herself to inquire into his exact meaning.

"You'll vouch for her being efficient, courteous, obliging, industrious, quick to learn, slow to forget, and above all a sticker."

"Yes, sir," said Peggy without blinking. It was Elaine who uttered a little protesting gasp, and looked frightened.

"Well, I'll take your word for her. You can be on hand in the morning, I

suppose," he added, looking at Elaine.

Like one in a dream Elaine heard herself concluding the arrangements for her plunge. She listened to the outlining of her duties, without any clear idea of what was said, agreed to the amount of her salary, without knowing whether it was more or less than she had hoped, and finally found herself outside with Peggy, in the dazed, uncertain mood of one who is not quite sure whether she has been dreaming or not.

"Isn't it glorious?" Peggy's enthusiastic comment sounded wide-awake enough, at all events. "You're a wage-earner, Elaine. Doesn't that sound imposing? Don't you think Uncle John's a dear? I'm coming down some afternoon when I haven't anything to do, and look at all those blue-prints. There's something awfully fascinating in the things you don't know anything about."

Elaine reflected that in this case she was likely to find untold fascination in her new occupation. Her answers to Peggy's cheerful chatter were rather vague. Now that she had taken the final step her courage was ebbing. Her mother's warnings, which she had brushed aside with a sense of irritation when they were spoken, sounded in her ears with monotonous insistence. After her reckless mood of the afternoon had come the inevitable reaction of tremulous cowardice. Why had she ever done it? What had made her suppose herself qualified for such a position? How was she ever going to bear it?

If this was her mood, when sustained by the cheerful companionship of Peggy, it was worse after they had said good night. Mrs. Marshall had received the news of her daughter's prospective advent into business life with a burst of tears, after which she had refused to partake of the evening meal and had retired to her room. Elaine, herself, had choked down her food with difficulty, and went to bed at last with the firm conviction that dreams of the night, however unpleasant, could be no worse than the nightmare of her waking hours. She was not quite clear as to whether she had already disgraced the family name by the work she had chosen, or merely was about to disgrace it, by proving her woeful inefficiency. Whichever was true, she could see nothing but blackness ahead, and as she tossed on her pillow, flushed and wakeful, she wished though vainly for the relief of tears.

CHAPTER XVIII

A REMARKABLE EVENING

A wakeful restless night is not the best of preparations for launching out in untried activities. The pale, tremulous Elaine, who presented herself at Mr. John Mannering's office the next morning, was far less equal to the ordeal of being "sized up" than she had been the previous day. A soldier, on the eve of his first battle, may have sensations very like those of Elaine, as she seated herself at the desk and began her unfamiliar work.

Time in a business office is a deliberate affair, Elaine soon discovered. It was no wonder that much was accomplished when the hours were two or three times as long as the easy-going hours with which she was best acquainted. At ten o'clock she was impatient for luncheon. At eleven she wanted to go home. By noon she was ready for bed.

The other girl in the office gave her information in more or less technical terms, which left Elaine little the wiser. It was incredible that she could ever master the meaning of the phrases Miss Newell rattled off so glibly. Each new item, as she gave it her attention, crowded out all that had gone before. She felt like a spent swimmer, clutching desperately at slippery, water-soaked stalks, to find each giving way in her hand. And when Miss Newell had finished Elaine was gasping, like a swimmer who has come to the surface after going under.

The middle of the afternoon found her tired, bewildered and so near to complete disheartenment that it needed only a feather's weight addition to her load to wreck her weakened courage. As ill luck would have it, that trifling extra was forthcoming. About three o'clock the office door swung ajar to admit a florid gentleman, accompanied by two young girls. Elaine, recalling Miss Newell's instructions, rose hastily and approached them.

"Did you wish to see Mr. Mannering?" she began, addressing the florid gentleman. Then all at once it flashed over her that the something vaguely familiar in the faces of the two girls was not a misleading fancy, as she had thought. She really knew them, for she had met them at Peggy Raymond's Hallowe'en party. So strong had Elaine's feeling of forlornness become by now that even the appearance of these mere acquaintances gave her pleasure out of all proportion to its exciting cause. The color rose in her cheeks, as she said smilingly, "Why, good afternoon."

"Good afternoon," said the girls in chorus, and returned her look blankly. It did not occur to her that her own tardy recognition should have given her the key for interpreting their unresponsive manner. The possibility that these acquaintances failed to recognize her, as she had come so near failing to recognize them, was far from her thoughts. She was being snubbed, taught her place. She would have to remember, henceforth, that a girl who worked in a real estate office must not expect cordial treatment from girls who, like the lilies of the field, toiled not, and yet outdid Solomon in gay apparel.

Just what the florid man wanted, and whether he got it or not, Elaine was

never exactly sure. For in the abyss of humiliation into which she had descended connected thought was impossible. In her misery and confusion she was conscious of but one thing, an overwhelming longing for the end of that dreadful day. Plenty of girls have gone home from just such experiences, to be cheered, soothed, encouraged, and sent out in the morning with teeth set and heart resolute. But the atmosphere of Elaine's home was not of the sort to revive the fainting and inspire the discouraged. Mrs. Marshall, as well as her daughter, had spent a wretched day, weeping at frequent intervals, and bemoaning the changed fortunes which had brought her family to such straits. There was nothing in her companionship to invigorate the girl who crept home at nightfall, half crushed under a burden no less heavy because it was largely imaginary. Elaine's evident dejection plunged Mrs. Marshall still deeper into melancholy, and the mother's low spirits reacted on the girl. Instead of the mutual helpfulness which should have been given each was making it harder for the other.

When Peggy Raymond made her appearance at eight o'clock Elaine was lying back in the easy chair, her eyes closed, and her face colorless. Mrs. Marshall, sitting on the other side of the round table, had the air of one who has expected the worst all along, and whose sole remaining comfort is the doubtful joy of saying, "I told you so."

"Headache?" exclaimed Peggy sympathetically, yet cheerily too, for Peggy had an intuitive shrinking from the sympathy which knocks the props out from under a tottering courage. "Well, the first day of anything is always a hard day. Want me to rub your head?"

"I don't know." Elaine spoke languidly, more as if it were too much trouble to refuse than as if she welcomed the thought of Peggy's ministrations. Indeed she was almost in the mood to resent the idea of being made comfortable. But Peggy slipped behind her chair, stroking the throbbing temples with a touch at once gentle and assured. "Uncle John telephoned me this evening," she observed. "He says you take things a little hard, but that you'll be all right as soon as you're used to it."

Mrs. Marshall sighed heavily, and Elaine came to life sufficiently to say with some spirit, "There are some things one never would get used to."

Peggy's caressing hand paused a moment. "Some things! What sort of things do you mean?"

"Like being snubbed, for instance."

"Snubbed?" cried Peggy, startled.

"Of course it's no more than I should have expected. When I took up that work, I ought to have known that people would look down on me, and treat me accordingly. But, somehow, I wasn't prepared for it."

"Look here, Elaine," said Peggy, thoroughly aroused. "Business is business,

and when a girl goes into an office, she must expect that she'll be told of her mistakes. But to imagine that Uncle John is going to look down on anybody--"

"Oh!" Elaine's tone was apologetic, as she interrupted. "It wasn't your uncle. He was very kind indeed, all that I saw of him. But along in the afternoon--" to her amazement she was obliged to pause to get control of her voice--"two girls came in, girls I met at your house," she faltered. "Their name is Henderson."

"Bess and Lu! Well, what of it?"

"Why, I spoke to them before I thought, just as I would anywhere. Everything seemed so strange that I had a silly feeling as if it were awfully nice to see anybody I knew. And they--O, Peggy!" Elaine broke down and sobbed helplessly. "They were so cold and distant, and all at once I realized how they must feel to have a girl in an office acting as if she thought she was as good as they were. I suppose I deserved to be snubbed."

"If I had been listened to," observed Mrs. Marshall tragically, "this could not have happened."

"Why, I never heard of such a thing," Peggy cried, finding her voice. "Lu and Bessie are nice, sensible girls, as far as I know. I can't imagine their doing anything so ill-bred and silly as snubbing you for speaking to them. I simply can't believe it."

"It's true, though." Elaine wiped away her tears and Peggy took a long look at her. "Well, what of it?" she said.

Elaine hesitated. "You mean--"

"I mean it's not worth a second thought. If they didn't intend anything, there's no sense in worrying. And if they did, they're beneath your notice."

"But, Peggy!" Elaine expostulated, "don't you see I can't go on with this if people are going to look down on me and despise me? I don't mind how hard I work, but this--"

Something in Peggy's look halted her mid-way in the sentence. The other girl's eyes were ablaze.

"Elaine, see here. Why did you apply for that position in the first place?"

"Why, I needed the money, Peggy."

"You didn't do it on the spur of the moment, did you? You thought about it, and made up your mind that it was the right thing to do?"

"Why, ye-es--" Elaine hesitated, feeling a little suspicious that she was walking into a trap.

"You're the same Elaine to-night that you were yesterday, aren't you? You haven't been spoiled, by spending a day in Uncle John's office. Is there any reason why anybody should like you less or respect you less?"

"Of course not, Peggy. It's only the way people feel about such things."

Peggy did not mean to stop till she had spoken her mind. "You're ready to

give up doing something you're sure is right and sensible because of what people think. You know they're wrong. You know such prejudices are silly and mistaken and yet you haven't got the courage to fight them."

"I don't know who would be brave enough for that," Elaine said dejectedly.

"Everybody ought to be brave enough. Think of the people in the world who've conquered real obstacles, people like Helen Keller, for instance. It's a shame for such a girl as you to give in to a lie, to let herself be beaten by something she despises. You're in the right and you know it. Hold your head up and let people think what they please."

Peggy's exhortation broke off abruptly on the discovery that there was a fourth person in the room. A tall girl stood behind her, looking down upon her with a face oddly like Elaine's, though something--not years alone--had given it a rather pathetic maturity. She was pale, and the shadows under her eyes made them seem unnaturally large. As she met Peggy's startled gaze a little smile fluttered across her lips, and then, as if unaccustomed to those surroundings, was lost in instant gravity.

"I've been listening to you, Peggy Raymond," she said, in a voice which Peggy instantly recognized as one she had heard before, and that over the telephone. "And I think the cap fits me."

Peggy sprang to her feet. Even in her excitement she was on her guard against betraying the secret of Elaine's confidence. Fortunately her confusion over Grace's unexpected appearance and contribution to the conversation was sufficient for the exigencies of the case. No one could have guessed from her manner that she had a previous knowledge of Grace's presence in the house.

"Sit down, Peggy Raymond." The older girl touched Peggy's shoulder lightly, and seated herself near by. A furtive glance told Peggy that Mrs. Marshall's face was colorless, and that Elaine was sitting bolt upright in her chair, her eyes protruding, as if her sister had been a chance visitor from another planet.

Apparently Grace was not impressed by the excitement due to her unheralded appearance. "I'm Grace Marshall," she said, addressing Peggy. "Elaine's sister."

"I couldn't help knowing that you were Elaine's sister, after really looking at you," Peggy replied, trying to smile naturally. Grace reflected a minute, apparently studying the pattern of the carpet.

"So you don't believe in giving in to a lie."

"No!" Peggy gulped. "I don't."

"And if you're in the right, you should hold your head up and let people think what they please. Isn't that what you said?"

"It's what I believe, anyway, with all my heart."

"I half think you're right. And do you know, Peggy Raymond, I've been

acting on a very different plan. I'm going to tell you something that happened not so very long ago and see what you have to say about that."

It was the story Peggy had heard before, shorn of some of its tragedy, compressed into as few words as possible; a bald little tale, if the burning eyes of the narrator had not supplied the pathos. She sat with crossed hands as she told it, and when she had finished, looked expectantly in Peggy's direction. "Well?" she said as the other hesitated.

"Well," cried Peggy, voicing a sentiment she had expressed earlier, "somebody ought to hide. But not you."

"Then you think I've been silly."

"Yes." Peggy's smile took the edge off her bluntness.

"And cowardly?"

"You could be braver."

"Well, I've been brave enough to come down and see you, anyway." Grace laughed out, and Peggy noticed that both Elaine and her mother started nervously at the sound. "You mustn't think me familiar on short acquaintance. You see I've known you for some time, and the most popular topic of conversation in this house since we moved in has been Peggy Raymond. You don't mind my calling you *Peggy*?"

"I'd mind dreadfully if you called me anything else. And, by the way!" Peggy had some sensible ideas as to striking when the iron is hot. "Mayn't I bring some of the girls in to see you? They will be so interested when they know Elaine's sister has come."

Grace's gesture reminded Peggy of one who, coming from the darkness of a cellar, blinks and shrinks away from the sunshine.

"Not yet. Not quite yet," she pleaded. "Let me get a little used to things first." And Peggy wisely forbore to press her, guessing that as soon as Grace began to live normally her unnatural shrinking from companionship would disappear.

It was an exciting evening. Peggy stayed till her mother telephoned to ask if anything was the matter. When some reference was made to Elaine's headache, Elaine protested.

"Headache! I haven't any headache. I never felt better in my life."

Peggy viewed her with approval. It was not only that Elaine's color had returned, and her languid eyes had brightened. There was another change, indefinable, but not to be mistaken. When courage and resolution come flooding back into a heart deprived of both the least observing cannot fail to note the difference.

"Going to the office, to-morrow?" Peggy demanded, as she rose to go.

"Of course."

"And you're not going to say silly things any more, are you, about people who look down on you?"

"I'm not going to be beaten by my sister. Grace needn't think she's got a monopoly in the courage of the family." Elaine slipped her arm about Grace's shoulders, her face so transformed by tenderness and pride that it was hardly recognizable.

Grace looked rueful over the implied compliment. "I'm afraid neither of us could be called heroines. But Peggy's started us right, and we'll have to help each other to be brave."

It certainly was a remarkable evening. But the thing which astonished Peggy even more than the dramatic appearance of Elaine's mysterious sister, was the fact that Mrs. Marshall kissed her good night.

CHAPTER XIX

AMY IS DISILLUSIONED

"Elaine's sister here! Why, I didn't even know she had a sister. Is she nice, Peggy? Has she come here to live? It'll be lovely for Elaine, won't it?"

That was the way Friendly Terrace received the announcement of the third member of the Marshall household. It was surprisingly easy, Peggy found, to evade answering questions as to the date of Grace's arrival, and the reason she had not joined the family earlier. Peggy said with perfect truth that Grace was not very strong and that even now it might be some time before she was able to see Elaine's friends.

But by the end of a fortnight Grace was so far restored to the normal attitude of girlhood toward the world outside that she no longer shrank back from the window if a passer-by chanced to look up, nor gave evidences of collapse when Peggy suggested that one of the girls might come in with her after school.

As a matter of fact Grace made a much more favorable impression on the girls of the Terrace than Elaine had done. There was something in her look of fragile delicacy that was distinctly appealing. Ruth lost her heart to her at once, after the impulsive fashion of school girls. Priscilla, who, ever since her misunderstanding with Peggy, had been on her good behavior, took especial pains to be cordial to the new-comer. It occurred to Peggy one afternoon to wonder how it happened that Amy had not as yet accepted any of their invitations to call and meet Elaine's sister.

"I'm sure you'd like her, Amy. And you're just the one to do her good. Sup-

pose we run in for a few minutes."

"I guess not." Amy's tone was hollow. "I don't feel like meeting strangers."

Peggy cast a sidelong glance in her direction, and made a discovery which temporarily banished from her mind the topic under discussion.

"Amy, I believe you are growing thin."

She made the announcement jubilantly, expecting it to be received with enthusiasm, but Amy did not speak.

"Have you really left off eating candy?" continued Peggy, innocently interested. "Seems to me I haven't noticed any boxes of chocolates in your desk lately."

"I haven't been eating very much candy." Amy sighed so heavily that Peggy looked at her again. Amy had really lost flesh, but that was not all. About her hung an air of depression, as inconsistent with the normal Amy as hollow cheeks, or a total loss of appetite.

"Amy, I believe something is the matter. What is it?"

"You'd think it was silly." Amy's tone indicated a longing to confide her griefs, only restrained by a dread of being laughed at.

"Silly troubles are the very worst of all sometimes," Peggy declared comfortingly. "Go ahead, dear. Out with it."

For a moment Amy hesitated. Then her pent-up woes burst bounds.

"I'm not going to live through the year."

"What!" Peggy could not believe that she had heard aright. "What did you say? I didn't understand."

"I'm not going to live through the year." Amy repeated her startling statement with a deliberation and an emphasis which carried the conviction that at least she meant what she said. Peggy burst into excited expostulation.

"Amy, you're crazy. I never heard anything so absurd. You have lost a little flesh, to be sure, but no more than is becoming. I thought you would be delighted. What makes you think that anything ails you?"

"I didn't say that anything ailed me, did I?"

"If you don't expect to live, it stands to reason that you must be sick."

Amy shook her head. "I might be killed in an accident. Or I might be taken sick suddenly, and not live more than two or three days."

Peggy's suspicions were aroused. "Amy Lassell, you've been doing something silly."

"You can laugh if you like. I dare say it seems funny to you." Amy spoke with an injured air which Peggy failed to notice, so busy was she in following the clue which her quick wit had suggested.

"I know," she burst out. "It's a fortune teller."

Amy made no effort at evasion. On the whole it seemed a relief to be found out.

"Yes, it was a fortune teller. But if she'd been a faker she never would have told me that, you know yourself. They tell you how rich you're going to be, and whether you're going to be married once or twice, and things of that sort. But the ones who are just tricksters, don't ever tell people they are going to die right away."

Peggy checked her impulse to laugh. The thing might seem a joke to her, but it was serious enough to Amy. Her loss of flesh, and even more the haunted look in her eyes, was proof of that.

"Tell me all about it," she said soothingly, and Amy closed with her offer so hastily as to suggest that all she had wanted was a chance.

"She's a woman on West Spring Street, Madame Planchet. Lots of girls go there to get their fortunes told, just for the fun of the thing. One day Blanche Estabrook and I were going past, when she suggested that we should stop. Madame Planchet only charges a quarter."

"That's cheap, considering what she gives you," observed Peggy with an irony that glanced harmlessly from her friend's armor.

"Of course neither of us took it a bit seriously," Amy explained. "We were both laughing when we went in and all the time Blanche was having her fortune told I fairly stuffed my handkerchief into my mouth, I giggled so. Blanche's fortune didn't sound a bit true, you know. It was all about coming into a lot of money, and that she was going to have a serious sickness when she was about twenty, but she'd recover and be a lot healthier after that. And I supposed mine would be just the same. But it wasn't."

"Go on!" Peggy prompted impatiently, for poor Amy paused, as if she found it difficult to disclose to another the black page of the future so unexpectedly revealed to herself.

"Well, she looked at my hand a minute, and then she said, 'I can't tell your fortune. There is nothing to tell.' I was so stupid that I didn't understand for a minute. I thought she only meant that there wouldn't be much doing in my life, you know. And I asked her if I wasn't going to get married. I thought fortune tellers married everybody off. And then she said in a dreadful voice, 'You have no future,' and I began to understand."

"Poor Amy! To pay a quarter for that!" Peggy cried, but Amy refused to smile.

"I asked her how long I was likely to live, and she said it wasn't possible to be exact. It might be six months, and it might be a little more. She was sure I shouldn't live out the year." Amy paused a moment before she added, "And one month has gone already."

"O, you goose!" cried Peggy. "You dear silly goose! Don't you see how perfectly absurd it all is?" She launched into arguments convincing to herself, but

useless as far as Amy was concerned. More profound logicians than Peggy long ago discovered the hopelessness of mere reason when confronted with a well-grounded superstition.

Peggy went home thoroughly uneasy, and reproaching herself that her absorption in Elaine's affairs had blinded her to Amy's troubles. The month of anxiety had told upon the girl. The dismal prophecy might fulfil itself. Peggy's attention wandered from her geometry that evening. More absorbing than the theorem assigned for her lesson was the question of helping Amy.

When she suggested a walk the following afternoon there was a brightness in her eye which indicated that her hard thinking had not been unprofitable, in her own opinion at least. Amy was not inclined to be enthusiastic over the proposal.

"I don't know as I care much about walking where I'm likely to be seen. I thought it was going to rain this morning, and I put on this old tam I haven't had on my head this year."

"All the better," Peggy said jubilantly. Then, as Amy looked as if she would like to know what was meant by that speech, if it were not too much trouble to ask, Peggy added hastily, "We'll take the side streets. It won't matter if your tam is old."

Once under way Peggy set herself to be entertaining. She talked so rapidly, changing the subject with such abruptness as to hold Amy's attention fixed on her conversational gymnastics. When she halted suddenly in front of a shabby looking building on West Spring Street Amy cast a startled glance about her and fixed her gaze on a fly-specked card, in the window, bearing the announcement, "Madame Planchet, Palmist." Then she turned on Peggy eyes brimful of reproach.

Peggy had expected this. "We are going in," she said quietly.

"No, Peggy. O, not again! I can't stand it."

"Yes, we are, my dear. And the only thing I ask of you is not to say a word more than you can help. Leave me to do the talking."

She pushed Amy up the steps ahead of her, and held tightly to her arm, as she rang the bell, apparently apprehensive that her captive would take to flight if not forcibly detained. Amy's air of shrinking horror did much to justify this suspicion. When shuffling footsteps sounded in the hall, and a slatternly girl opened the door, Amy drew back with a precipitateness which came near sending the two of them to the bottom of the steps.

"Is Madame Planchet at home?" demanded Peggy, righting herself adroitly, and clutching Amy more tightly than before.

"Walk in," said the slattern, and led them down the hall to a stuffy little room hung with mysterious charts. Peggy looked about her with an air of interest.

"I am almost sure this is the place," she cried. "Charts on the wall and red curtains, just as Roxanna said. Yes, I'm pretty sure we're right."

Amy opened her mouth and closed it without emitting a sound, in a fashion suggestive of a dying fish. She perceived from Peggy's expression that she was expected to listen to her friend's observations, instead of taking part in the conversation.

"I don't know why you should act so scared over the idea of having your fortune told, as lucky a girl as you are. For of course your Uncle Philander's money is all coming to you."

Again Amy's jaw dropped. She looked frankly stupid.

"Doesn't it seem lovely to think you're going to see Europe this summer?" continued Peggy enthusiastically. "I think you were sensible though, to travel all over this country first. O, dear! It would make me fairly envious if it were anybody but you. To think that I've hardly been out of the town I was born in, and here you go everywhere."

Peggy's fancy sketches were beginning to be interesting, by virtue of their sheer audacity. Amy listened, a faint amusement showing through her air of perplexity.

"Won't it seem funny to settle down in Germany to study your music, after your lovely summer? But I suppose you love that too, almost as much as travelling. That's what comes of being a genius."

This time Amy was forced to bite her lips to keep from laughing. Musical appreciation had been left out of Amy's composition. She could not recognize the most familiar air when she heard it hummed, and, as far as she could see, the only difference between a street band and a symphony orchestra was that one made more noise in proportion to the number of players. But even her amusement over the role of a musical genius, so unexpectedly assigned her, vanished when the red curtains parted and a tall woman came into the room.

The discovery of her callers appeared to surprise Madame Planchet. "My assistant neglected to inform me that anyone wished to see me," she explained, in what Peggy mentally denominated as a "mincing voice." "You wish your fortunes told, of course. I give several grades of readings, ranging in price from twenty-five cents to a dollar."

"I think the twenty-five cent ones will be all we can afford for to-day," said Peggy with an artlessness which would have made Amy smile, if the horror of her last visit had not been overshadowing her. "And please tell my friend's fortune first. I want to know if she's going to keep on being as lucky as she has been so far."

Amy surrendered her hand to Madame Planchet's inspection, and Peggy noted with sympathy that the girl's face was colorless. She also improved the opportunity to study the appearance of the unconscious fortune teller. The woman's heavy, coarse face gave conclusive proof of bad temper. The lines about her

mouth, the furrow plowed between her brows, something in the glance of her restless black eyes, all indicated to Peggy that she would not scruple to take a cruel revenge on the unlucky person who offended her.

"A very good hand." The voice was smooth. "I see a few illnesses in early childhood, but after the twelfth year there is no sign of sickness. You will live to a good old age and enjoy excellent health."

Amy's gasp was so pronounced that Peggy thought best to distract Madame Planchet's attention by dropping her umbrella. As the clatter subsided, she picked it up again and begged pardon.

"Other good fortune is in store for you," continued Madame Planchet. "I see a large amount of money coming to you soon. It is to be left you by a near relative. I should say a cousin, or possibly an uncle." She studied Amy's palm with absorbed interest for a moment and started out on a new tack.

"You have remarkable gifts in the line of music. I see that through their cultivation a great future will be open to you. There is fame in store. You will study abroad, and earn laurels as a singer."

"Wonderful!" Peggy murmured abstractedly. And she was rewarded by a sudden convulsive twitch of Amy's shoulders.

After emphasizing the fact that Amy had already seen much of the world and was to travel extensively in the near future, the fortune teller contented herself with a few prophecies which would apply with equal exactness to nine girls out of ten. She paused with a complacent air, for after following Peggy's supposed clues she was very sure that she had hit the mark with unusual correctness.

Peggy's fortune was the usual jumble. To tell the truth, she hardly listened, and apparently Madame Planchet was of the opinion that after doing so well by one of the pair it was unnecessary to put herself out to make shrewd guesses regarding the other. Peggy was glad when the monotonous voice ceased, and she could drop her half dollar on the table.

"It was well worth it," she said with a significance lost on the smiling Madame Planchet.

"If you young ladies should try the dollar readings," observed the fortune teller, pocketing the coin, "you would find them much more satisfactory. I describe your personal characters fully, showing you the weaknesses against which you should guard, and also the traits which should characterize your life partner. Kindly mention me to your friends. Good afternoon."

Once outside, the two stood looking at each other. "Well, Amy Lassell," Peggy cried, "if you're not convinced now that that woman is a thorough-going, outrageous old fraud, I'll wash my hands of you."

Amy had hardly recovered from her daze. "But why did she do it?" she persisted.

"Don't ask me. Though I think I could make a fair guess. You said yourself that you laughed all the time she was telling Blanche's fortune. I suppose she thought you were making fun of her art or science, or whatever she calls it, and she wanted to get even."

Amy straightened herself and drew a long breath, like one who lays down an intolerable burden. The face she turned on her friend was radiant.

"Peggy," she cried joyously, "let's go down to Bird's--I don't care if I do look like a fright--and get a nut sundae."

CHAPTER XX

AN EVENTFUL PICNIC

For some time Peggy had been waiting anxiously for warm weather. Not that Peggy had any quarrel with the winter months. Her vigorous constitution responded joyfully to the challenge of the cold. When the snow "crunched" under her elastic tread, and the air was full of frost crystals, and the wind whistled boisterously, and played tricks with people's hats and umbrellas, then Peggy's eyes were brightest and the blood in her veins raced most jubilantly.

Peggy's reasons for being impatient for spring's return were not personal ones. They concerned the Dunn family. Various remarks let fall by Estelle, Isabel and the others, had indicated such incredible ignorance of the country, that at first Peggy could not believe that it was not assumed. Gradually, however, she had reached the conclusion that these children, living within a few miles of grass-covered acres and groves of trees, knew as little of either as young Hottentots might be supposed to know of the North Pole.

Along in February Peggy's friends began to hear plans discussed for giving the Dunns a day's outing in the country, as soon as spring should arrive in earnest. Little by little they had all come to feel a personal interest in the affair. Indeed "Peggy's Dunns" had gradually grown to be almost a neighborhood possession, and more than one household had their welfare at heart.

When Peggy decided that the grass was green enough, the air balmy enough, and the orchard trees sufficiently like bridal bouquets to make it practicable to carry out her plan, she passed the word along the line. And in honor of the occasion Amy fell to making fudge, and Priscilla bribed Susan to undertake a batch of doughnuts which would go a long way toward satisfying the inner

cravings of the picnic party.

Elaine had not expected to share in the fun. But when she came home one Friday evening to announce that, owing to the presence of calsiminers in the office, the next day would be a holiday, Peggy was inclined to regard the occurrence as an especial interposition of Providence. And truth to tell, the sequel did not cause her to change her mind in that regard.

"It's perfectly heavenly to think that you can go with us. And now perhaps you can coax Grace into coming. It would do her any amount of good."

But Grace, though the change in her from day to day was almost as marked as that taking place in the springtime world, drew the line at chaperoning the Dunn family for a day in the country. The rest of the girls went along, Peggy, Priscilla, Ruth, Amy--now restored to her customary cheerfulness--and Elaine, who, after the long hours and close confinement of office work, found the prospect of a day in the open unspeakably alluring. Each girl had a child in charge, for though Francesca could not leave the factory Jimmy had succeeded in arranging his business affairs so as to take a day off, and the Dunn picnickers numbered five.

They were an odd quintet, as they climbed aboard the street car, for though "Peggy's Dunns" were the first ones thought of along the Terrace when outgrown clothing was to be given away, Mrs. Dunn seemed to have a genius for putting the half-worn suit on the boy it could not fit by any possibility, and for dividing up the girls' garments so that each should present as patched and piecemeal an appearance as possible. But, after all, the misfit coats and mismated skirts mattered very little, Peggy thought, since the faces of the company were beaming with anticipation.

Peggy had selected a charming picnic ground on the edge of a small lake, lying in a cup-shaped hollow, with woods for a background, where spring flowers palpitatingly awaited discovery, and with farmhouses accessible, where milk could be purchased, and other provisions, for that matter, if the contents of the lunch baskets gave out. Peggy, however, had no concern over this possibility, for to all appearances the aforesaid baskets contained ample provisions for fifty.

The Dunns knew what to expect. There was to be a lake, and woods, and wild-flowers, for Miss Peggy had said so, but that the terms meant little to them was proved when Estelle uttered an excited cry. "There's the lake!"

The others joined in rapturously. "Ain't it grand!" "O, my!" Peggy turned wonderingly.

"Lake! Why, we're not nearly there. O, you poor children!" For Estelle's grimy forefinger was pointing triumphantly at a puddle in an adjacent field, a pool perhaps ten feet across, its surface ruffled by a cheerful little breeze. "Well, there's one comfort," Peggy thought. "They'll be wiser before they get home."

When the real lake came in view, the Dunns were breathless with excite-

ment. They climbed down from the street car on the edge of a green meadow and the children walked gingerly across the turf, looking about them apprehensively, as if on the lookout for the warning, "Keep off the Grass." Isabel, who had fallen a little behind, galloped up to Peggy with a spring beauty in her hand.

"Miss Peggy!" She was breathing hard, but whether from her run or from excitement Peggy did not know. "Miss Peggy, kin they put me in jail for that?"

"O, dear!" Peggy cried, an unaccountable lump appearing in her throat. "They won't put you in jail for picking all the flowers you can carry home. Can't I make you understand that everything here belongs to everybody?"

It was a very wonderful picnic. Jimmy Dunn had visited the city park, and boasted a proud familiarity with trees and birds. But the other children could not recover from their amazement at seeing trees that did not grow in rows, out of squares obligingly left in cement sidewalks for that particular purpose, while the unexpected discovery of a blue bird was as startling as the appearance of a blue rabbit would be to the majority of people. "I thought birds was brown," drawled Johnny Dunn. "They is down 'round us."

"Maybe they gets sooty," suggested Estelle wisely. "My, wouldn't it be grand, though, if they'd get washed up, and be flying 'round all red and yaller and ev'ry color."

[image]

"LUNCHEON WAS SERVED SHORTLY AFTER THEIR ARRIVAL."

Luncheon was served shortly after their arrival. "I don't know why it is," Peggy confessed. "But it always seems as if you couldn't get fairly started on a picnic, till you'd had something to eat. I feel that way myself and I guess these children are just the same only more so." Accordingly they sat in a ring in the fresh young grass, and disposed of such quantities of sandwiches and doughnuts that the scientific estimate of the capacity of the human stomach was then and there proved incorrect, beyond a shadow of a doubt. Peggy expected that the gorged Dunns would find a period of inactivity necessary, but instead of stretching in somnolent attitudes under the trees when the moment arrived that they could hold no more, they scattered in all directions. As it seemed quite impossible that they should get into mischief or danger the girls left them to their own devices, and sat talking happily while the breeze brought the coolness of the little lake, and the fragrance of the apple orchards, mingled with more delicate scents, the perfume of the moist earth, the breath of tiny flowers fading unseen, perhaps, but making earth the sweeter for their blooming.

"I found some grand ones."

Peggy looked up smilingly into Estelle's radiant face. Then she got to her feet rapidly, for the child's hands were filled with early garden flowers, with several clusters of geraniums showing up dazzlingly among the more modest blossoms. "Where did you get them?" Peggy gasped.

"Over back of that house." Estelle gestured with her treasures in the direction of a snug-looking farmhouse standing on a rise of land above the lake.

"Don't pick any more there, dear. I guess those flowers belong to the people who live in the house. But all the flowers in the woods, and growing around the meadows, belong to everybody." She made a grimace at the other girls, over the head of the unconscious Estelle. "I've got to go up to the farmhouse and explain matters."

"I'll go with you," said Elaine, jumping to her feet, and the two started up the long slope, Peggy sighing penitently. "It was all my fault. I was so anxious those children shouldn't think they were going to be arrested if they picked a dandelion, I guess I went a little too far the other way. Who would have thought that they would have stumbled on a garden first thing?"

The farmer's wife, being indoors, had not noticed the rifling of her garden, but so far from displaying annoyance over Peggy's explanations, she was manifestly interested. "I've heard tell," she replied, "that some of those city children set store by flowers to beat all. And she picked her hands full, did she? Didn't know the difference between wildflowers and garden stuff? Well, well!"

But when Peggy, producing a not over-full pocketbook, made tentative offers to pay for the damage Estelle had wrought, the good woman's protest waxed indignant.

"Now I'd like to know what you take me for? Pay for 'em? I'd be ashamed to look my husband in the face when he came in if I took your money." She went to the window and looked with interest down the long slope, to the slight figures moving with such joyous abandon. "All brothers and sisters, you say?"

"Yes, and there's two others not here, a sister who's about fourteen and the baby."

"And we haven't chick nor child," said the farmer's wife. The shadow that crossed her kindly face, as she stood watching the small flitting shapes, had not lifted when Peggy and Elaine said good-bye.

At the door Peggy had an idea, and halted. "There isn't any boat that we could get around here, is there? I'd like to take those children out on the water if I could."

The farmer's wife came to the door. "Why, we've got an old dug-out tied down under the willows. It leaks a little, but you'd have to load it with stone to sink it. We keep it there, 'cause it's handier if we want to go to Mr. Miller's, t'other

side of the lake, to row across, than to go all the way 'round. 'Tain't so easy rowing as it might be, but you're welcome to it if you want it."

The ungainly craft, tied under the sheltering willow trees, did not look as if it would be so easy rowing. But the girls undaunted, took their seats, each with a pair of oars, and started bravely for the other shore, the water slapping the square end of the dug-out, as if the two were in a plot to make progress slow and difficult. The appearance of the boat was hailed with shrieks of delight by the Dunn family, who rushed to the water's edge to view its advance.

"There's room enough for all of them at once, if it wouldn't be too heavy," Peggy remarked.

"O, I guess we can take them all," returned Elaine, tugging at her oars. "They'll be satisfied if we just keep it moving, you know."

"They're all waiting to welcome us." Peggy glanced at the row of motionless figures, ranged along the shore as if held spell-bound by the spectacle afforded by the stately craft and the toiling oarsmen. Then instinctively Peggy began counting, "Three, four, five. Where's number five?"

"It's one of the little girls that's missing, Estelle or Isabel. I can't tell them apart." Elaine's eyes travelled from the waiting row, across a clump of trees reaching to the water's edge, on to the cleared acres belonging to the Miller farm. Then she uttered a startled exclamation.

"Peggy! See that child! Will she know enough to let them alone?"

"What? Where?" Wildly Peggy's eyes followed those of her friend, and at the sight which had prompted Elaine's frightened question Peggy rested on her oars, staring blankly ahead.

Against the green of the hillside rows of little white boxes stood out in bold relief. Among them wandered Isabel Dunn, as Gulliver might have wended his way among the habitations of Lilliput, looking about her with a curiosity that betrayed no twinge of timidity.

"Bee-hives!" Peggy gasped. "And I suppose she never heard of such a thing as a bee-sting. O, if she'd only look this way!"

But Isabel Dunn was too absorbed in her own discovery to have any eyes for the pageant on the lake, so attractive to the other members of her family. She stood absorbed in front of one of the hives, watching the busy occupants with an interest which owed part of its zest to the fact that here was something of which Miss Peggy had said nothing. Out in the country folks made houses for bugs to live in. She wondered that Miss Peggy had failed to comment on such surprising philanthropy.

Heedless of the line-up of the Dunn family, eagerly anticipating a row, the girls turned the boat toward the absorbed student of nature. Apprehension put fresh energy into their stroke. The dug-out toiled ahead at what was really a sur-

prising rate of speed. The little Dunns, disappointed, joined in a howl of protest. The sound reached Isabel's ears, and she turned, inadvertently stumbling against a hive. An instant later, her knowledge of natural history was increased by a significant item, in a fashion to impress it on her memory indelibly.

Shrieking wildly, Isabel started down the slope, the enraged bees in pursuit. Peggy and Elaine had thought they were pulling their hardest but at the sight of the child's danger the dug-out seemed fairly to leap ahead, like a lazy horse pricked with a spur and roused to unwonted speed.

Down the hill came Isabel, gaining momentum with every step, driven to frenzy by the darts of her relentless pursuers. Whether the blue lake seemed a refuge, or whether she would have rushed with equal blindness into flames, it is impossible to say. But it is certain when she reached the water's edge she kept on running, with the result that in an instant she had splashed out of sight, while the boat was still some distance away.

"Pull!" gasped Peggy. "Pull hard!" But she would have done better to save her breath, for Elaine, her lips parted, showing her clenched teeth, was putting into each stroke every ounce of energy at her disposal. In an appallingly short time, a tow-colored head came to the surface of the water and again disappeared.

"A little harder on the right oar," warned Elaine. Again she set her teeth and pulled. Again the mop of drenched hair showed on the surface of the water and went under. The girls watched to see it come in sight again, but it did not reappear.

"She's not coming up." Elaine rose in the boat, kicking off her low shoes, and unfastening her heavy walking skirt. Then she went over the side with the ease and celerity of the practised swimmer. Peggy, who had not added swimming to her many accomplishments, and had watched for Isabel's reappearance in an agony of helplessness, felt hope revive. Elaine seemed so sure of herself that it was impossible not to share in her confidence.

The little group on the shore had discovered what was happening. The children ran about crying shrilly. Above the sound of their frightened voices rose Amy's lamentations as she wailed, "O, why didn't I watch her! O, why didn't I watch her!" Not that Peggy spared time just then to interpret the medley of sounds beating upon her ears. She saw nothing but the placid water, heard nothing but the sound of the little ripples breaking against the boat's side.

Elaine came to the surface, after some seemingly interminable seconds, spluttered, filled her lungs and went under again. Peggy, white and shaking, sat crouched in her seat. O, those crawling seconds, that terrible waiting, the ghastly uncertainty. She felt the scented breeze in her face, and dimly realized that overhead the sky was blue. A snatch of bird-song dropping to her ears made her suspense seem unreal. It could not be that this dreadful thing was happening,

while all the world around was unchanged.

Peggy came out of her trance when Elaine's dripping head cleaved the blue water. This time Elaine did not come alone. Her left hand was supporting a limp little figure, whose hair floated on the surface of the water like yellow seaweed. Half a dozen strokes brought Peggy alongside the pair. Leaning over, she took Elaine's burden from her. The head that swayed like a broken flower, the open, unseeing eyes, the colorless face, seemed to her inexperience proof that the worst had happened. She sat like one stunned while Elaine gripped the dug-out and pulled her dripping self over the side.

"Quick, Peggy!" Elaine's teeth were chattering, for though the sun was bright the water of the little lake still retained a coolness suggestive of melting snow. "Quick! We must get her to the house, as soon as we can, and get to work."

The suggestion that something still could be done, put new life into Peggy. It is quite certain that the clumsy dug-out made record time in reaching the landing. The farmer's wife was waiting for them there, and she took the unconscious child in her motherly arms, and almost ran up the slope, while the girls followed, Elaine walking with difficulty in her wet clothing, Peggy weak from fear.

Fortunately for them all the suspense was nearly over. For the farmer's wife had hardly begun her work of resuscitation when a soft little sigh escaped from the child's blue lips. A minute after she opened her eyes. Apparently it was too great an effort to be prolonged, for immediately she closed, them again. But the flutter of the lids was enough to render Peggy limp with relief and thankfulness.

"There! There! Have a good cry if you feel like it," exclaimed the farmer's wife, bustling about. "There ain't nothing like a good cry, if anybody's been all keyed up. I'll get some hot milk down her, and she'll be all right. But your friend had better be getting out of her wet things, or she'll be coming down with something. 'Tain't too late yet for pneumonia."

It was a good thing for Peggy to divert her mind with anxiety about Elaine, who, having been duly rubbed and given something hot to drink, was ordered to bed, while her clothing dried by the kitchen fire. By this time Isabel was sufficiently revived so that the other children could be admitted to admire her appearance as she lay between blankets smelling strongly of the ammonia which the farmer's wife had applied to the bee stings. There was a gleam of envy in Estelle's eyes as she gazed upon her sister. It was not fair that Isabel should have everything, first be stung by bees, and then nearly drowned. It would have been more generous of her to have divided those claims to distinction with some equally deserving member of the family.

"Seems like a shame to disturb that child by trying to take her home to-day," said the farmer's wife. "Why don't you leave her with me over Sunday? By that time she wouldn't get any harm from going out."

"I don't know as she would be willing to stay," Peggy replied, but when the case was laid before Isabel she indicated the greatest satisfaction with her present surroundings. Isabel was not accustomed to being a person of importance. She liked the sensation, as she liked the softness of the bed on which she lay and the brightness and neatness of the pleasant little room.

"Of course it would be a great deal better for her to stay. Do you think your mother would mind, Jimmy?" asked Peggy, reflecting that the responsibility of taking a party of children to the country for a day was greater than she could have imagined. Jimmy's attitude was reassuring. "Ma! Why, she'll be glad to get rid of her over Sunday," he declared. "Pa hates so many underfoot on Sundays." It was accordingly arranged that the farmer's wife should bring Isabel home Monday morning, provided Isabel's condition warranted it. Otherwise she was to communicate with Peggy, who assumed the responsibility of conveying the information to Mrs. Dunn.

The picnic was resumed, awaiting the drying of Elaine's clothing, but it is safe to say that no one of the Dunn family had the opportunity again that day to get into mischief. Each girl made herself responsible for a child, and watched it with a hawk's alertness, though not with a hawk's motive. "We've let them steal flowers, and get stung by bees, and then pretty nearly drowned," Amy remarked. "And for one day that's enough," a sentiment received without any dissenting voice.

But in spite of the drawbacks of the day and the fact that Isabel was left behind, the small Dunns were enthusiastic over the picnic. "Be you goin' to take us again some day, Miss Peggy?" little Johnny asked, as he hugged his armful of flowers closer, and smiled at her over the heads of the blossoms.

"I don't know," Peggy answered with a gasp. "I'll have to wait to get thoroughly over this, before I'll be able to make up my mind."

CHAPTER XXI

AN UNEXPECTED VISITOR

The papers Monday evening contained an account of a heroic rescue. There was a fancy sketch of a young woman diving from the deck of a pleasure yacht to save a child who with uplifted arms was drowning in the most dramatic manner imaginable. Elaine saw the sketch over the shoulder of the man who occupied the

seat in front of her in the street car, and it was not till she reached home that she discovered that the theatrical young heroine was supposed to represent herself.

Along the Terrace they had found it out long before and each of the girls had made a beeline for the Marshall home with a paper under her arm. Peggy was the first arrival, with Amy a close second, while Ruth and Priscilla reached the door at the same minute. What with the rustling of papers, and the chorus of voices all explaining at once, Mrs. Marshall conceived the idea that something dreadful had happened, and it was necessary to produce the smelling-salts before she was equal to hearing the account.

The story had been written up with high regard for picturesqueness. The Dunn family had multiplied into a car-load of ragged children and the five Terrace girls had become wealthy young women who devoted a large share of their leisure to philanthropy. Upon Elaine, as the heroine of the occasion, adjectives were lavished with the generosity characteristic of newspaper reporters when they start out to be complimentary. Mrs. Marshall gradually lost her look of apprehension as she listened, and her face took on a motherly pride, which obliterated, for the time, its habitual expression of fretful weakness.

When Elaine arrived there was a rush in her direction. Four newspapers were shaken in her face. Four voices, each uplifted in the laudable effort to drown out the other three, read the most thrilling of the head-lines. Elaine stared incredulously at the heroine with the dishevelled hair, on the point of plunging from the deck of the yacht into tossing waves below. At last the truth dawned upon her.

"You don't mean, girls," she gasped, "you can't mean that it is intended for--me. O, it can't be possible."

In chorus four voices read, "The heroine of the occasion is Miss Elaine Marshall, 2618 Friendly Terrace." Further disclosures were checked by Elaine's putting her hands over her ears.

"All that in the paper about me? How perfectly dreadful! How in the world could they have found out about it?"

Ruth looked a little guilty. On her arrival home Saturday night, she had painted Elaine's exploit in glowing colors, and Graham's friend, Jack Rynson, was a reporter on the *Star*. Fortunately Elaine did not notice the incriminating color in Ruth's cheeks, and Peggy was saying consolingly, "Why, I think it's splendid. Just listen, Elaine! 'Seeing the peril of the child, the intrepid young woman, with a magnificent disregard for her own peril--'"

"Please," implored Elaine, her cheeks flaming. "I feel like a hypocrite, when I look at that yacht and those foaming waves, and think of that ridiculous old dugout and the smooth little pond. Heroine! It's the most absurd thing I ever heard of."

But though Elaine protested, the fact remains that there are more unpleasant

things than to be overpraised for what one has done. Her mother's air of radiant pride, the satisfaction the other girls took in the highly decorated account of the exploit, even the reporter's superfluous adjectives were not without their agreeable side. When the departure of the girls with the rustling newspapers left the house to its customary quiet, Elaine was aware of an inconsistent, and thoroughly inexplicable impression that something very pleasant had happened.

The peremptory ringing of the telephone bell interrupted Elaine's supper. Mrs. Marshall and Grace listened to the following one-sided conversation.

"Yes, yes, it's the same one."

"Why, I didn't know."

"O, it was dreadfully exaggerated. It really wasn't anything."

"No indeed. I feel as well as ever."

"She's very well, thank you, and Grace too."

"I'm sure we're glad to know our friends haven't forgotten us."

"O, we'd be so pleased to see you any time. O, thank you, very much. Good night."

When she had hung up the receiver she turned a luminous face upon her family. "What do you think," she cried tremulously. "That was Mrs. Winthrop."

"Not Mrs. Littleton Winthrop!" Mrs. Marshall set down her tea-cup, her hand shaking.

"Yes. She had read that ridiculous account in the paper, and she said the nicest things. And she and Vivian are coming to see us very soon. O, dear, I'm too excited to eat."

But the excitements of the evening were not over by any means. Shortly after eight o'clock, a motor coughed outside the door. There was a sound of feet on the walk and then a ring at the bell which somehow suggested that somebody who knew exactly what he wanted had his finger on the button.

Elaine opened the door, for enough of Grace's shrinking remained so that she found that simple office difficult. A plump, red-cheeked gentleman, who looked rather like an understudy for Santa Claus, greeted her with something more than cordiality.

"Elaine Marshall! Well, upon my word! You've grown almost out of knowledge." He put his hand upon her shoulder and gave her a smacking kiss on the cheek nearest him. "That's for the heroine," he said. "Mother in? And Grace? Good. First rate."

He had his arm about the girl's shoulder when he walked into the living-room, where Mrs. Marshall and Grace had sprung to their feet at the sound of his voice, and he held Elaine firmly while he shook hands with the others. Then he seated himself, stroking his snowy beard, and looking about him with eyes that twinkled serenely. He looked more like Santa Claus than ever.

"Look here," he said. "I'm not going to scold. That isn't my way. But for you to hide yourselves away from your friends isn't a square deal, you know. I could say considerable on the subject if I were that sort of a man. But as long as our little heroine here--"

"Little!" cried Elaine, her indignation over the adjective eclipsing for the time being her modest reluctance to accept the noun.

"Has given me the clue to your whereabouts," continued the visitor, ignoring the interruption. "We'll let bygones be bygones."

The talk turned to less delicate topics. But presently the caller, who gave increasing evidence of being a man who knew his own mind, turned on Grace with a question.

"Given up the idea of finishing your college course?"

"O, yes, Mr. Clement."

"Why?"

Grace hesitated. "If there were no other reason," she said at last, in a low voice, "the question of expense would settle it."

"That's what I fancied. Suppose you start in next fall, and send your bill to me."

"But, Mr. Clement--"

"It's good business sense, Grace. A thing half done is undone, and that's all you can say. Go ahead and get your education. Fit yourself for the work you like, and the work you want to do."

"But, Mr. Clement, I wouldn't think of accepting--"

"Stop right there, my dear. You're going to talk nonsense about being under obligations and that sort of thing. Your father and I were friends in our boyhood and it was the sort of friendship that stood by in a rough sea. More than once your father has come to my help when his name on my note was all that stood between me and bankruptcy." Santa Claus took out his handkerchief and blew his nose violently. "And after that if his daughter had a silly pride which wouldn't allow her to accept my help in making as much of herself as possible, I should be driven to conclude that she wasn't worthy the name she bears."

Elaine looked at her sister furtively, and something she saw in Grace's face made her heart flutter with a glad expectancy so keen as to be almost pain. Grace's brow was knit, and her face was pale, visible signs of an inner battle. Elaine breathed hard, guessing the tremendous importance of the struggle, and the significance of victory.

"I've grounds for being very angry," Mr. Clement went on with his whimsical smile. "When the three of you disappeared without a word or sign, I was hurt, and many of your friends felt as I did. I tried to make myself think that you would write me soon, but the weeks and months went by, and not a line from any of you.

I had a right to be angry, and I was. However, I'm not a man to continue bringing up old scores. We'll call it square, Grace, if you'll close with my offer. What do you say? Is it a bargain?"

His compelling eyes were on her. For a moment he looked less like Santa Claus than some old viking, fearless of tempestuous seas, accustomed to conquest. As Grace's troubled gaze met his a curious change was apparent in her face, as if a spark of his resolution had fired hers.

"I'll--I'll do it, Mr. Clement," she faltered, and checked herself quickly, as if frightened by the rashness of her own promise. But Mr. Clement gave her no time for wavering.

"Done!" he cried, and catching the frail hand in his he shook it heartily. "And this spring and summer devote yourself to getting a little color, and putting a few pounds of flesh wherever you need them most. If you're not careful, this little sister of yours will be putting on airs, and ordering you about just because she's the biggest."

It was not early when Mr. Clement left, but, in spite of the lateness of the hour, Elaine yielded to an overwhelming desire to see Peggy. It was to Peggy alone that she had confided her great unhappiness, and it seemed to her that she could not sleep unless Peggy had heard the good news, the wonderful sequel to the incident which had made the close of the previous week eventful.

Elaine framed some excuse for a late call on Peggy which she herself had forgotten as soon as the door shut behind her, and made her way across the dewy grass. Overhead the stars twinkled in friendly fashion. The splendid winter constellations had given place to the less showy pageant of the summer, but it flashed across Elaine's mind that she had never before dreamed there were so many stars. The sky seemed golden with them. Peggy, upstairs in her own room, struggling with an essay due the end of the week, looked up amazed at an Elaine to whom she had never been introduced. For the new stars which Elaine had seen flashing in the sky, were only reflected from her shining eyes. Her radiant face prepared Peggy for the best news that could be spoken.

"O, Peggy! What do you think? Grace is going back to college."

"To college!" Peggy's sympathy was never of the half-hearted sort. Now the two words fairly tinkled as she spoke them, as if Elaine had announced some tremendous good fortune which had befallen Peggy herself.

"An old friend of papa's, Mr. Clement, is going to send her. And, O, Peggy, another old friend, Mrs. Winthrop, called up while we were eating supper. She had seen that account in the paper and was so sweet about it. I'm afraid that perhaps we weren't just fair to the people we used to know. Perhaps they were better friends than we thought."

"Of course," cried Peggy. "People are almost always better than you think.

The things that seem horrid can generally be explained."

"And isn't it funny!" Elaine found in a burst of laughter the relief that might as easily have come through tears. "All this wouldn't have happened, if it hadn't been for those blessed Dunns."

Peggy jumped, as if the name had touched a nerve. "O, I've just been aching to tell you that Isabel was going to stay."

"To stay?"

"Jimmy came over and told me just before supper. That farmer's wife came in bright and early this morning. She wanted to keep Isabel, and Jimmy said his mother was willing, because it would be one less to take care of. There's a sad side to it," Peggy concluded, her bright face falling, "to think that the mother of any child would give her up as easy as that, but I can't help being glad that little Isabel will grow up with grass and flowers around her, and plenty to eat, and all the rest of the things they don't have on Glen Echo Avenue."

Elaine had risen to go. "I feel like staying and talking all night but I must get to bed and be ready for my work to-morrow. Yes, indeed. I'm awfully glad about little Isabel. It seems as if everything was turning out right for everybody."

"It's a pretty good world after all," smiled Peggy, voicing a favorite theory.

The words rang in Elaine's ears as again she sped across the dewy clover under the spangled sky. "Of course," she told herself. "How could it help being a good world as long as it has such people as Peggy Raymond in it?"

THE END.

*** END OF THIS PROJECT GUTENBERG EBOOK THE GIRLS OF FRIENDLY TERRACE ***

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